Conceptual Limitations of Our Reflection on Photography

The Question of "Interdisciplinarity"

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In these remarks on the limits of conceptualization of photography, I would first like to focus on what is generally considered the main limit of photography itself: time. In our doxical views on photography, we still stick indeed to the "snapshot" idea of photography, apparently left untouched by all possible paradigm shifts since 1839 (and of course before, but that is not the problem at stake here). Yet, my interest in time in photography is not just an interest in the limits of the medium; it is also a rather direct way to tackle the specificity and thus, I argue, the conceptualization of the medium itself. Although such an interest in medium specificity is no longer taken for granted today, I still believe that it is not only valuable, but also necessary, in discussions on limits, borders, transgressions, and the like. So please excuse my old-fashioned obsession with photographic time and medium specificity, and try
 surface markings between which the boundaries are rapidly being blurred; in both cases, the result is similar: photography can no longer be distinguished from other ways of knowledge production by visual means.

Yet at the same time, this picture is much too dark. Even if photography as a compact, monolithic, one-dimensional medium may seem to have vanished into the air, there are also many discursive, methodological, and theoretical innovations that help us conceptualize its object. Sometimes these innovations contradict the already mentioned tendencies and doubts, but this is utterly normal in periods of open discussion and radical transformations. For symmetry's sake, I will also limit myself here to three major changes. What they have in common is their ability to make us think more clearly about what photography is and what pictures mean. First, I would like to stress the rediscovery and fine-tuning of historicization, which is no longer reduced to art historical schemes and categories (the "artist," his or her "style," and so on) but enlarged to the study of interpretive frames and models for instance ('discourses,' in a loose sense of the word) and to the whole field of photography (industrial, scientific, and vernacular photography, and so on). Second, one should mention a renewed interest in questions of medium specificity, whether they are determined by new visions of what specificity means (no longer an eternal essence, but a permanently shifting effort to 'link' signs, supports, and contents) or by a politically inspired resistance to the spread of hybrid forms in contemporary visual culture. And, third, how could one ignore the rise of interdisciplinarity as the universal answer, not to say the wonder drug, to all our interrogations and perplexities? Interdisciplinarity is seen as the panacea we need in order to escape the limits of disciplinary and narrowing methods, and its usefulness is hardly contested.

But what exactly do we mean here, that is, in the field of photography, by "interdisciplinarity"? And does interdisciplinarity really offer us the profit we are expecting from it? Does it not...
reintroduce, albeit unnoticed, new forms of limits? And, if this is the case, is this an inherent danger, or should we try to define other types of interdisciplinary that give us new looks on the problem of the limits of conceptualization? These four questions will form the thread of my argument.

Interdisciplinarity is not a decontextualized and dehistoricized phenomenon. In the field of photographic discourse, it can certainly not be reduced to one single phenomenon. Interdisciplinarity implies first of all “disciplinarity,” and in the case of the discourse on photography, such a disciplinarity implies a previous phenomenon of “professionalization.” In order to become a real discipline, photographic discourse had to become the discourse of a certain type of specialists, and very often, I will argue, those specialists appeared to be no photographers at all. In other words, if interdisciplinarity supposes professionalization, then the discourse on photography becomes a kind of “language game” that is played for and by academic peers, in an arena that is no longer either that of the photographic practice itself or that of social life and social action (and this is, of course, what is really at stake in the recent discussions on professionalism). 9

If in the first decades, and even the first century, of photography, the discourse on photography was held by photographers (the difference between professionals and enlightened amateurs does not play a fundamental role here), its professionalization has produced a radical shift in the profile of those speaking on photography: it is no longer the photographers themselves who are socially recognized as having the key to what they do; it is academics, that is, people having no direct relationship with artistic practice (unless as critics and theoreticians). 10 Those specialists acquire the privilege of “talking art” in a serious matter, and they have hardly any competition when “theory” is involved. Such a shift is rather common in contemporary society: the same can be observed in literature, for instance, where theory is no longer produced by the writers themselves (this was still a perfectly common stance in the nineteenth century; it may suffice to think of Flaubert). It is, however, not a fatality: in film studies, for instance, filmmakers are not excluded from the professional debate: Eisenstein, Hitchcock (or should we say his ghostwriter, Truffaut?), Bresson, Godard, Tarkovsky, and many others are not disqualified by the fact that they are not scholars in the classic sense of the word. For photography, the situation is slightly bizarre. On the one hand, one observes an increasing tendency toward “professionalism” (and thus away from practice). On the other hand, the professionals under question have a very particular background: they are not sociologists, art historians, or, why not, photography scholars, but writers, often with an important personal creative practice in literature. Think for instance of the five major names in the socially and professionally legitimized discourse on photography: Walter Benjamin, André Malraux, Susan Sontag, John Berger, and Roland Barthes, who have in common the fact that they are in the first and the last place... writers (yet not all of them in the same way; some of these authors are not “fiction writers,” and even if they are, or are not, their relation to fiction cannot be reduced to one simple model; Malraux for instance moved away from fiction to theory, whereas Barthes’s work evolved the other way around, without therefore ever attaining the border of “real” fiction). Nevertheless, all of these writers have been more or less sensitive to the seduction of the literary in their texts on photography. The case of Roland Barthes is of course the most explicit, since it is not impossible to argue that his later work on photography was a way of coping with the impossibility to write the novel he was dreaming of: the case of Susan Sontag, who was not confronted with this problem of the impossible novel and whose writing on photography is much more turned outwards, may represent the opposite pole in the range of possible attitudes toward the relationship of literature
and writing on photography. Are we then to be surprised that in a recent book on the cultural history of photography, the author opens with a simple sentence that sounds like a manifesto: “C’est la littérature qui donne du sens à la photographie.” Even if today things have become a little different (one might suppose, for instance, that the role of the writers has now been taken over by philosophers and art historians, and the names of Jean Baudrillard and Geoffrey Batchen come here easily to mind), this strange concentration of photographic discourse in the hands of people with a literary background is not a simple detail or a mere coincidence. Before asking some questions on the pros and cons of such a situation, always from the perspective of the limits of conceptualization, one should start wondering if one can really speak of interdisciplinarity when the professional discourse on an object is detained almost monopolistically by one type of scholars, despite their paramount contributions to the field and whatever may be the importance of the “visual turn” in their thinking. One may indeed suppose that a certain type of monodisciplinary discourse has simply taken over the position of a former monodisciplinary one. In other words, the discourse on photography presents itself in a very interdisciplinary manner, but its reality may resemble also a disguised new monodisciplinarity (of course, I know I am exaggerating).

2

What are the advantages of this (supposedly) literary approach of photography? Provided one accepts my idea that the discourse on photography has been a literary discourse for many years, that is, a discourse secretly or overtly haunted by the prestige of literary fiction, how then has literature reshaped our vision of photography? In what follows, I would like to stress four ideas: antitechnofetishism, antiessentialism, antiformalism, and antilogocentrism.

A major achievement of the literary discourse on photography has obviously been the fading of technological fetishism. Contrary to many ancient discourses on photography, the discussions on technical aspects of photography cease here to be rather vague and general (the more technical discussions have survived more easily in the socially delegitimized circles of photo amateurs). Of course, literary discourse pays a lot of attention to the impact of photography as a new technique of image making, but this interest is often so general that one has the impression that the “idea” of photography matters more than the formerly more widespread discussions on lenses, cameras, lighting techniques, photographic papers and chemicals, and so on. I consider this an achievement (with many losses also, of course), since it has freed the discourse on photography from its narrow technical bases and opened it to the broader field of cultural history and critique. This innovation does not imply, however, that the new discourse on photography is no longer hindered or hampered by technological determinism. The clearly exaggerated ways in which the digital evolution has been overinterpreted as an absolute watershed is a good symptom that the refusal of technofetishism can perfectly go along with an obvious technological determinism. The most interesting aspect of literary discussions on technological determinism in photography, however, has less to do with photography itself than with the mediation of photography. André Malraux’s ideas on the photographic revolution on art, for instance, cannot be separated from his reflection on the encounter between the medium of photography and the medium of the book. In this sense, the technological determinism introduced by literary scholarship on photography seems to be very nuanced.

A second innovation, probably the most important one of those enumerated here, is the attack on essentialism. The interdisciplinary reading of photography has made possible that the basic assumption of a photograph as mainly pictorial, that is, spatial and thus nontemporal or nonsequential, has been radically con-
tested. Step by step, literary-minded scholarship has brought in an analysis that stresses the photograph's vulnerability to the characteristics of its seemingly opposite pole: the text and, more broadly speaking, the time-based arts. This larger scope can be described in three phases: first, a picture is seen as situated in time; then, a picture is seen as telling a story; and, finally, a picture is seen as capable of narrating a fiction (literature being, as Thélot, reminds us, radically different from the purely denotational language of the "paper," be it the newspaper or the research paper). It will come as no surprise that my examples here are in the first place Mieke Bal and Jacques Derrida. The narratological bias of Mieke Bal's feminist readings of the image not only aims at exceeding the word and image divide, but also tends most of all at developing (inventing) alternative (fictional) stories to oppose patriarchal rule in art (and) history. The interest of Jacques Derrida in the photonovellas by Marie-Françoise Pissart, for example, has an even more narrative and fictional bias, which illustrates his vision on the impossibility to fix meaning.

*Time, story, fiction:* these three inextricably linked elements contradict rather bluntly the traditional vision on photography as a realist slice of space. The motivations of this "despatialization" of photography are utterly diverse, but its impact on the essentialist vision of photography is very direct. Photography is no longer concerned by the Lessing-Greenberg paradigm opposing the *nach-technie* of the picture and the *nach-technie* of the text. Or to put it in a more cautious way: the "natural" link between photography and space is at least interrupted by the literary scholarship on photography. This idea has been replaced by a much more temporal, narrative, and even fictional vision, which has now become "natural" in its turn, but which, contrary to the "realist slice of space" theory, is not thought of in terms of "essence."

A third shift created by the literary discourse has been, I think, the insistence on photography as a meaning-producing device. In this sense, one might say that there has been a clear break with the more formalist approach of photography. Indeed, the meaning under analysis is never seen as simply the meaning of the "thing" and its formal parameters, but as the meaning produced by a spectator, who tends to project on the image his or her own stories, which may very well be fictions or phantasm. This antiformalism is also an antinaturalism, and it explains why the reading of photographs has been an easy candidate for all types of methods and disciplines obeying cognitive turn, with its well-known emphasis on memory, intertextuality, framing, pattern recognition, scenarios, and... narrative in general.

A fourth and maybe more paradoxical contribution of the literary orientation of interdisciplinarity is finally the antilogocentrism of the new discourse on photography. The construction of meaning in and through language is wrapped nowadays in a fundamental distrust of the representative possibilities of language, which seem "inherently" (such a vision is also, of course, essentialist) incapable of bridging the gap between sign and referent and of stopping the infinite deferral of meaning due to the stream of free-floating signifiers. These views on language have become a new doxa, that of the postmodern sublime, and it should be clear that this theoretical and philosophical input dramatically increases the importance of the above-mentioned phenomena of antitechnofetishism, antinessentialism, and antiformalism.

3

The benefits of an interdisciplinary opening of the discourse on photography are undeniable. Yet this methodological broadening is not without danger. I am not discussing here the fact that the professionalism of this new discourse has put between brackets many achievements and insights linked to the practical knowledge of the nonprofessionals, that is, the nonacademics, the artists, the amateurs, and so on, which is a serious problem to which
I will have to return later. What I am discussing here is the fact that interdisciplinarity itself bears certain risks.

Let us start for instance with the very success of the literary discourse on photography. As in Orwell’s tale, one might say that in discussions on interdisciplinarity, all disciplines are equal, but some are more equal than others. This is undoubtedly the case: the literary approach does not simply add itself to an existing range of discourses on photography, but also tends to be “the” leading discourse in the field (in the way linguistics were to become the “pilot science” in the humanities of the early 1960s), and this dominant position explains that other disciplines are less well placed when entering the game of interdisciplinarity. This is a general problem: the idea that there is a kind of ecumenia in matters of interdisciplinarity is an utopia, and each time we speculate about the virtues of interdisciplinarity, we often fall prey to the fashion of the day (even if the interest of the fashion is beyond question): we do nothing more than replace an outdated form of disciplinary approach with a newer one. In that sense, one can safely put that interdisciplinarity narrows as much as it opens.18

But all this probably sounds too general. Things become stickier when one takes a closer look at what is probably the bottom line of literature’s concern with photography: time. What is at stake here is, I think, the fact that a very specific conception of time is transplanted from the medium of the text to that of the photograph. Heavily relying on Lessing’s idea of time as nacheinander, literary scholarship on photography tends to disclose in the image something that resembles the notion of sequence or sequentiality. Hence the insistence on, for instance, the presence of several successive moments within a single frame (the photographic enunciation), the traces of the temporality of the picture’s taking and deciphering (the photographic enunciation, both at the side of its production and at the side of its reception), the material transformations of the picture through time (the photographic history), the fascination with sequential arrangement of pictures, photovellas, chronophotography, and so on. However valuable such an approach may be, it nevertheless promotes a conception of time as nacheinander that should not be uncritically received as universal truth. The conceptual limitations of this textual and literary scholarship become very clear when the issues of time in photography are raised from a different perspective. A good example is given by a recent article of the French philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman, who denounces the illusions of Marey’s chronophotography (a type of photography always heavily emphasized by literary scholars, who see in it a major step toward the deconstruction of the space-time opposition). Quoting Bergson’s ideas on vital durée, he proposes that chronophotography is on the contrary a devitalizing reduction of time, which is never a sequence of autonomous moments.19 Bergson’s ideas and their afterlife in many contemporary texts on time19 may represent a very useful (and critical) complement to a literary and art-historical vision of time that tends sometimes to confound time with action and storytelling.

Third, and this problem is the logical consequence of the previous issue, the literary turn of photographic discourse also has implications for the way the visual corpus is processed. By turning away the essential opposition between the temporality of the text and the spatiality of the image, the interdisciplinary reading of photography has created an internal subdivision between two types of pictures: on the one hand, pictures capable of being read within a temporal (or even narrative and fictional) prospective, and on the other hand, pictures where this temporal dimension is simply not relevant. And although the frontiers between both categories are of course always shifting, the mere acceptance of this difference is hazardous, since it sneakily reintroduces a kind of essential difference between time and space that the interdisciplinarity approach of photography should question more radically. Moreover, such a splicing of the corpus can reinforce the (rather discouraging) ideal that the interdisciplinary encounter of
two disciplines does not produce two views on the same object, but that each of these disciplines produces its own view on its own subject, and that interdisciplinary dialogue does occur less easily than we would like.

A fourth problem is that internal discussions within a certain discipline tend to be pushed to the background when that discipline is welcomed into existing discussions in a certain field and on a certain object. Seen from the outside, as we unavoidably tend to do when we are not specialists in the field, disciplines seem always much more monolithic than they really are for those working within a monodisciplinary spirit. Until now, for instance, I have established a seamless connection between textuality and time, for I think this is the way the “specificity” of literary discourse on photography is generally perceived. However, in literary theory the issue of time is far from being uncontested. In high-modernist criticism, there has always been a very strong inclination to support the “spatial,” explicitly antitemporal structure of literary works (it may suffice here to quote Joseph Frank’s ideas on “spatial form” and the controversy on the ideological underpinnings of this spatialization launched by Frank Kermode). And in avant-garde criticism, illustrated for instance by the work of the French author Jean Ricardou (who likes to quote Mallarmé’s introduction to the 1894 version of *Un coup de dés....“ le récit s’évite”), the disgust of temporal structures is turned into a disgust of story and fiction, both harshly accused of being “agents of idealism”: the very temporal, narrative, and fictional reading of an object is identified as a negation of this object’s materiality. In all these areas, the plea against temporality is not made from the viewpoint of the image, but, more astonishingly, from that of the text. However, this type of disciplinary dissent does often vanish when one starts doing interdisciplinarity, and the case of photography is not an exception to this rule.

Fifth and last, there is another difficulty that one may consider the trickiest in terms of interdisciplinary intercourse: the fact that disciplinary approaches engaged in interdisciplinary discussions are often not interdisciplinary themselves. In theory, the existence of a neutral metainterdisciplinary viewpoint might help solve this problem, but things being as they are, such a viewpoint does not exist and one always falls in with the problem of the power relations between disciplines.

It is thus important to be aware of the conceptual, methodological, and theoretical limitations of our use of interdisciplinarity. However, this awareness should not turn into an a priori skepticism toward the very use or usefulness of interdisciplinarity. The very fact that I quoted approvingly Didi-Huberman’s confrontational vision on chronophotography indicates well enough that interdisciplinarity is for me too an absolute necessity.

Therefore, what should matter, I believe, is the attempt at redefining, in a very modest and practical way, some of its aspects. Rather than solving the limitations of interdisciplinarity by creating “more of the same” by adding always more disciplines to the interdisciplinary concert, I would like to make a plea for a “different” interdisciplinarity, or at least try to make some suggestions capable of reducing, albeit in a symbolic manner, some of the above-mentioned problems.

A major issue in each form of interdisciplinarity should be a critical attitude toward professionalism, in the Fishian sense I have mentioned above. I think we will have a serious problem in redefining or reshaping interdisciplinarity if we exclude nonprofessional forms of discourse. Certainly in the case of discourses on art, such an exclusion would be counterproductive. But how can one imagine this reunion of professional and nonprofessional discourses? To begin, photographic discourse should make room for research by artists, since they are, in a certain sense, the real specialists in the field and those who are most committed to its
knowledge. This broadening of professionalism (I prefer this description to the alternative view of “de-academization” or “de-professionalization”) supposes of course that the artist’s research is acknowledged and legitimized as such, that is, as a theoretical practice that does not simply increase personal skills but also produces intersubjective knowledge. Moreover, this inclusion of formerly nonacademic speech and practices might take also a directly interdisciplinary form. Artists and scholars, to use the traditional vocabulary, should have the opportunity to work, think, and write together, and to do so in such a way that new, interdisciplinary forms of producing knowledge may become possible. Globally speaking, the collaboration of scholar and artist in the field of photography would then become a supplementary illustration of one of the most promising aspects of interdisciplinarity in the broader field of science: the razing of the barriers between the humanities (the “alpha” sciences) and the sciences of nature (the “beta” sciences). Given the fact that photography is a less institutionalized field than other artistic disciplines, and given also the fact that most scholars do not feel too reluctant to discuss technical matters regarding photography, the field may very well play a pilot role in this regard. For this reason, it is urgent for scholarly discussions to tie in with what has been explored or achieved in the field of, how shall I put it, “visual writing,” that is, certain forms of visual compositions aiming at establishing cognitive networks the way texts do. How to write visually is not a new question (one may think here of the ideas of Eisenstein on ideographic montage, to quote just one example, even if it is a rather outdated one), but it is a question that has now become very crucial. Visual artists not only “think,” but also their work often proposes illustrations of thought-provoking devices, whose structure and content have effects that can be compared to that of language. If we follow Barbara Stafford, for instance, we know that scientific thinking from at least the eighteenth century on has become increasingly “visual,” and many contemporary photographers present their work as real cognitive statements (a good example, it seems to me, is the work by Louise Lawler). In some cases, the difference between scholarly and creative appears to be very thin (a still stimulating example is Joseph Lesy’s Wisconsin Death Trip). At a more modest, but therefore no less necessary, level, one might think here of new forms of illustration in scholarly work. The neglect of the impact of the visual material included in a book, to put it negatively first, is always harmful to the argumentation developed by the author. On the other hand, the intelligent and audacious use of images can not only help the reading of a text, but also become part of thinking itself. All this is easy to realize. One can therefore only regret that it is so rarely effectively done.

However, all these innovations are still based upon a series of simple oppositions (the scholarly versus the artistic, the word versus the image, and so on). A more radical interpretation of interdisciplinarity is possible, which puts into question the very autonomy of each of these terms. Here, the recently redefined notion of intermediality may be very useful. Contrary to the traditional conception of intermediality as the relationship between two arts, two practices, two objects, or even two discourses, newer forms of “interart comparison” have emphasized the implications of the prefix “inter” in a way of thinking that is not alien to the spirit of deconstruction. As both Eric Mechoulan and Henk Oosterling put it in two seminal articles of the first issue of Intermedialites: a clear distinction has to be made between the interart spirit of the Gesamtkunstwerk and the more deconstructive spirit of the new intermediality, where the focus is on the “difference” of the “inter.” This vision opens many opportunities to new forms of interdisciplinarity, which can so become less monolithic, and therefore more interdisciplinary themselves. The contemporary philosophy of the intermediate is thus not an alibi to turn away from disciplines in favor of a kind of generalized “interdisciplinarity” that cultural studies is sometimes dreaming of; it is a way
to make the various disciplinary approaches more aware of their impossible purity. Here, too, these general reflections should not be separated from their practical counterparts, which are always much more than just "counterparts." The already mentioned use of new techniques of illustrations can for instance make room, not for a dehierachization of word and image, but for a more tactical use of hierarchical shifts between the verbal and the visual.50

Finally, this may seem, from our current ideological perspectives, a mere provocation, interdisciplinary research on photography may suggest new ways of going against the contemporary myth of the unspeakable. Referring to the pre-Romantic theory of the sublime, postmodern criticism is haunted by the defaults of representation and the shattering impact of this representative failure on the construction of the subject. I do not have the ambition to turn this page, but neither do I believe that this way of thinking is still very useful nowadays. If the increased use of interdisciplinary voices on photography only tends to increase our awareness of the limits of any representation—if interdisciplinary, in other words, reinforces the myth of the unutterable—I think we are losing a crucial opportunity to think against the grain.

Of course, interdisciplinarity confirms that it is not possible to exhaust the meaning of a photograph. Each new occurrence of interdisciplinary research crudely reveals the limits of all other language. And of course taking into account the image itself as a thought- and knowledge-producing device can only intensify our attention toward everything that escapes or exceeds verbal language. Visual thinking is definitely not the solution to the failure of words. But this is not the only lesson one can draw from the contact of words and images in photographic research. Why not turn the argument around and observe that, whatever the obstacles may be, images do manage to say something, whereas words do not necessarily fail to do the same? Would it not be refreshing to make a plea for "clear and distinct" ideas, not as something given that is to be dismissed because it can never be attained, but as a possible horizon for our efforts (after all, Descartes never said clear and distinct ideas were immediately available, without any effort: they are not simply to be found, they are to be made)? The very fact that the interdisciplinary mingling of words and images in our discourses on photography only seems to enhance our faith in the impossibility of representation may be seen as a paradoxical invitation to go beyond this difficulty and to search for clarity, simplicity, transparency, en connaissance de cause, that is, knowing that it is a difficult and probably impossible job. This is not a way of instrumentalizing art, of using art to the benefit of mere concept: such an idea is typical of "professionals" with little practical knowledge; practicing artists or craftsmen know very well how difficult and relative and fragile each communicative success in this field remains.31 Nor is this the easy way; on the contrary. The paradox of the whole thing is that, if the way of the researcher is the lectio difficilest, not the lectio facilis, this hardest thing to do now is taken for simplicity and straightforwardness, whereas the search for infinite deconstructive jouissance has become the easiest way. Just as in the case of a text, it should be stressed that producing infinite meaning in photography is much easier than trying to suggest just one single meaning, and neutralizing all the others that will inevitably pop up in the mind of the reader.

Contrairement à ce que l'on pourrait penser, tout écart... tend, une fois accepté et pris en charge par le lecteur, non pas à empêcher la lecture mais à l'activer... La participation du lecteur étant inversement proportionnelle au degré d'élaboration sémantique des poèmes... la difficulté n'est pas de produire du sens mais de produire un sens, ou un non-sens... il faut donc être prudent, ou du moins conscient de ce qui se passe à la lecture, car à la limite, la prolifération du sens est contrairement aux idées reçues, la marque d'une certaine faiblesse du système.32

Why not consider our new commitment to interdisciplinarity and the new relationships between words and images an attempt
to speak nevertheless? How to define and implement such an interdisciplinarity can only be sketched here in very general terms, but its major features will have to be at least threefold: (1) it must be really plural, and not just the opening of the interdisciplinary field to the fashion of the day (yesterday narrative and fiction, today deconstruction, and tomorrow something else); the ideal is not to fight narrative or fiction or deconstruction or whatever in the name of something new, but to combine them in a way that does not produces a kind of synthesis, for synthesis is often the name one gives to the dominant position of just one discipline in the interdisciplinary debate; (2) it must be very corpus-focused, since this offers the best guarantees of precise discussions on specific aspects and dimensions of photography; and (3) it should be itself as "interartistic" and "intermedial" as possible (words and images, scholarship and creation, and alpha and beta should intermingle, but here too in a dialectical spirit that leaves room for contradiction).

Notes

1. The big theme now is hybridization, to which the journal *History of Photography* will devote a special issue in 2006.

2. Or so easy, since photography is clearly a booming business: the difficulty of speaking on a subject has never prevented anyone from speaking of it. As I will try to argue later in this paper, the relationship between "easiness" and "difficulty" is more paradoxical than one may think.


4. Although there are of course exceptions to this view. See for instance Alain Buisine's book *Artet* (Nîmes: éd. Chambon, 1994), which makes a strong claim for the radical historicity of the medium, and thus for its conceptual unity.


7. The unfortunately less well-known works by the Belgian semiotician Henri Van Lier provide a good example of this approach: *Philosophie de la photographie* and *Histoire photographique de la photographie* (both books, which are from the 1980s, have been republished [Paris: Les Impressions Nouvelles, 2005]; the Lieven Gevaert Centre of the University of Leuven plans also an English translation). *Mutatis mutandis*, his views on photographic "specificity" are not very different from those held by Stanley Cavell in his first book on film, *The World Viewed* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1971; enlarged ed., 1979).

8. Here of course the first reference coming to mind is Rosalind Krauss's study on Marcel Broodthaers's, "A Voyage on the North Sea": *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999).


10. In that sense, Henri Van Lier's *Philosophie de la photographie* can be considered the last link in a long chain of "preprofessional" discourses on photography. This book, moreover, not only pays a well-merited tribute to the photographic practitioners but has also, despite its slightly misleading title, a strong anti-professional bias. As the blurb (manifestly written by the author for himself) puts it, "A la fois très artificielle et très naturelle, elle (= la photographie) invite à des considérations cosmologiques et anthropologiques radicales. C'est sans doute pourquoi, depuis un siècle et demi qu'existe la photographie, les philosophes se sont curieusement tus à son égard, ayant sans doute pressenti à quel point elle ébranlait leurs discours prestigieux."

11. If I am to develop a little on this improvised typology, I would be tempted to stress the closeness of Malraux and Barthes in this regard: Malraux's writing on art seems to me a clear "compensation" (and, given the baroque aspects of his style, even an overcompensation) of his farewell to fiction. Berger, on the contrary, can be put aside of Sontag, whereas Benjamin seems to occupy an intermediate position.

13. I make a distinction between technological determinism in the broad sense of the word and technofetishism, the latter being the all too exclusive focus on single technical aspects that become almost context independent. As Van Lier puts it nicely in Historie photographique de la photographie (although in a slightly different context), what is missing in technofetishism is the "logy" of technology (Van Lier, *Philosophie de la photographie*, 74).

14. It should be clearly remembered here that such a determinism is not a general feature of the discourse on photography. Notable exceptions are, for instance, Henri Van Lier, *Philosophie de la photographie*, 20; and Geoffrey Batchen, *Early Wild Idea* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), ch. 7.

15. Similar ideas can be advanced on the analysis of, for instance, the "slide," where the importance of contextual and cultural aspects is paramount; slides not only alter the materiality of the image but also reinforce the notion of intertextuality (slides are never isolated items; they are part of the slide show); the projection of slides is always a show, a performance; and the impact of slides on the selection of the subject is dramatically high (the same goes for the material that is now being digitalized); see, for instance, Horst Bredekamp, "A Neglected Tradition? Art History as Bildwissenschaft," *Critical Inquiry* 29-30 (2003): 412-28; and Jan Baetens, "Quelles pratiques pour quels enjeux?" *Pratique* 32, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 59-64.

16. See Jacques Derrida's untitled "Lecture" printed as an "afterword" (?) in Marie-Françoise Pissart, *Droit de regards* (Paris: Minuit, 1985), which starts this way: "Tu ne sauras jamais, vous non plus, toutes les histoires que je pourrai raconter en regardant ces images."".

17. In France, the conceptualization of the representative limits of language as a form of "postmodern sublime" is often linked with the publication of some basic "poststructuralist" works on the philosophy of art such as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy's *L'Autre littérature. Théorie du romanisme allemand* (Paris: Seuil, 1978); or Louis Marin's *Des papiers de l'image* (Paris: Seuil, 1993).

18. I would like to link this "narrowing" effect of interdisciplinarity to what Reed Wagenbrenzer calls the "illusion" of interdisciplinarity of the very scholars who consider themselves the champions of interdisciplinarity in today's humanities: the fact that we (literary scholars) are relying on works from other disciplines (for instance philosophy, sociology, and psychology) while reading also nonliterary texts (since we read Marx, Bourdieu, Freid, and so on) does not prevent us from "still doing what we do best: reading a text in a commentary tradition" (Reed Wagenbrenzer, "Toward a Common Market: Arenas of Cooperation in Literary Study," *ADFL Bulletin* 36, no. 1 [Fall 2004]: 20-26).


20. A more in-depth analysis of this problem will have to take into account the notion of time-image in Deluze, who opposes the temporal sequence of the "image-movement" to the ideal montage of the "image-times."


22. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (1966; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). If W. J. T. Mitchell's theory of the "diagram" (see W. J. T. Mitchell, "Spatial Form in Literature: Toward a General Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 7 [1980]: 539-57, and W. J. T. Mitchell, "Diagrammatology," *Critical Inquiry* 8 [1981]: 622-33) has picked up Frank's heritage, this was largely due to the fact that his work tried to go beyond the very divide between word and image, space and time, that was the uncontested starting point of both Frank and Kermode.


25. See Louise Lawler, *An Arrangement of Pictures* (New York: Assouline, 2000); extracts of this work had appeared in the journal *October*.

26. Joseph Leys, *Wisconsin Death Trip* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973; 2nd reprinted ed., Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000). In the foreword to this book, it is quoted that Leys's work was the first work of this type to be accepted as a Ph.D. (in history).

27. A good, but in my eyes painful, example is the book by Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching for Memory* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), where the treatment of the visual material is so naive that it, completely unwittingly I suppose, undermines the sophistication of the text (the problem here, however, is not only the illustrations, but also the analyses of the images themselves)."