

Nour Dados

## Liminal transformations: folding the surface of the photograph

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## Liminal transformations: folding the surface of the photograph

Figure 1 Anonymous (Baqari's Wife)

1



Studio Shehrazade, Saida, Lebanon, 1957. Hashem el Madani

From Hashem el Madani *Studio Practices: An ongoing project by Akram Zaatari / The Arab Image Foundation*

© Arab Image Foundation

- 2 Reading an interview with the Lebanese photographer Hashem El-Madani, I was struck by the way that the threshold between image and narrative could be encapsulated in the simplicity of a photograph. In the interview, Madani speaks about an image from the 1950s labelled ‘Anonymous’ in the *Studio Practices* collection compiled by the Arab Image Foundation. The image of a fashionably dressed woman standing against a wall is marked by a series of black scratches that cover her face but nonetheless leave it partially visible (Figure 1). I had glossed over the image briefly before reading the interview, but Madani’s narrative on the scratches disrupted whatever I might have seen in the photograph earlier. As the black lines over the woman’s face are revealed as the product of scratched negatives, Madani’s narrative moves the image elsewhere outside the photograph itself – to the negatives, to the practice of photography that produced them, to the social and cultural landscape of 1950s Lebanon. If the imprint of light on paper that was the photograph before the advent of digitisation could not be without the negative, the ability of these negatives to impact on the image is intensified by Madani’s narrative. Where then, can we locate the evasive threshold of the photograph if it is only revealed by a negative that it can never be reduced to, and if it can never be separated from a narrative that it nonetheless cannot directly display?
- 3 The photograph throws up the threshold as a possibility and a challenge, but do we ever really pass the threshold of the photograph – the moment, the artefact, the stillness – to reach that other place? Where is it that we expect to go when we do? Perhaps we think photographs will allow us access to the paths of memory, to the scene of a crime, or that they will take us on a voyage to a distant place, to visit sites of cultural significance, or on a promenade down the avenues of history. But how does one enter and leave a photograph and where do we go when we do? Is the surface of the photograph really a threshold that can take us beyond the image? When we speak of ‘animating’ photographs, we are referring to processes that take place in this liminal zone where stillness becomes movement, moment becomes narrative, and artefact becomes memory. If the threshold of the photograph begins at the surface, what relationship does it have to the gaze, to the interpretative reflex, to the tricks of perception? Does the gaze graze the threshold of the photograph and bring us into another space or does it merely transform our desire to name, decode and classify into a narrative that takes the place of the image? What does the photograph tell us about the spatial and temporal dimensions of the threshold? How can the photograph lead us to a theorisation of the state on the threshold?

## Marking the threshold

- 4 In his discussion of Renee Green’s work *Sites of Genealogy*, Homi Bhabha opens up Green’s notion of the stairwell as a ‘liminal space’ to the question of *in-between-ness* (Bhabha, 1994: 4). The stairwell as an ‘interstitial passage between fixed identifications’ raises the possibility of a cultural hybridity without hierarchy, but also, and more importantly for the present discussion, it elucidates the interplay of the liminal and the ‘beyond’ (Bhabha, 1994: 4).
- “‘Beyond’ signifies spatial distance, marks progress, promises the future; but our intimations of exceeding the barrier or boundary – the very act of going *beyond* – are unknowable, unrepresentable, without a return to the ‘present’ which, in the process of repetition, becomes disjunct and displaced” (Bhabha, 1994: 4)
- 5 The liminal as the threshold of the ‘beyond’ marks a dangerous territory, particularly if as Bhabha suggests, the spatial transgression of the threshold signals a temporal disjuncture with which any return to the present becomes impossible. There is a portentous Benjaminian echo here. Susan Sontag remarks that Benjamin’s use of the past as ‘prophetic of the future’ signals that “the work of memory... collapses time” (Sontag, 1979: 12). Sontag frames this observation by recounting Benjamin’s attempts to translate chronology into spatiality (Sontag, 1979: 13).

The flash of memory in the present which organises Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' might represent an instance of this 'collapsed time' (Benjamin, 2007b: 255). The possibility of charting time spatially emerges in Bhabha to mark the liminal zone as the threshold at which spatial movement signals chronological disintegration. When viewed from this angle, the inclination towards the spatialisation of the threshold belies an attempt to figure the space of the 'beyond' topographically at the instant it becomes temporally unknowable and unrepresentable.

- 6 In psychology, the 'limen' is 'the threshold between the sensate and the subliminal, the limit below which a certain sensation ceases to be perceptible' (Ashcroft et.al. 2003, p.130). In one sense, the threshold of liminality is the point at which certain elements become visible and can be perceived. Its 'inbetweenness' may not be as important as it first appears since the liminal zone is not necessarily a location 'between' two entities, but rather, the place from which certain elements become visible. Yet perception marks only one of the three aspects of the threshold. The threshold is also a passage between two spaces, like a doorway, or a stairwell. This passage is of a reversible order in the sense that one can cross back and forth between the two spaces. The threshold also indicates another type of passage, one which does not reflect the to-and-fro of the first. This passage is closer to the breakthrough, the dawn of a new era or the precipice between life and death. It is not reversible.
- 7 Bhabha's claim that the beyond is 'unknowable and unrepresentable' situates the liminal zone of his discussion in the order of a breakthrough, a one-way threshold or an irreversible passage. Yet his analysis of Greene's work on the stairwell does not explain how a reversible threshold (like the stairwell) becomes an irreversible threshold (of the beyond). Indeed, it is unlikely that the stairwell, as an interstitial passage and a reversible threshold, could come to play the role of the irreversible threshold of the beyond, unless it is read through Sontag and Benjamin as a move towards spatialisation that signals the collapse of time. In aligning these two possibilities of the threshold, as both reversible (spatially) and irreversible (temporally), the liminal zone in Bhabha's discussion opens up the possibility that the ordinary (a place as unextraordinary as a stairwell) could also be the very site of historical, social and political breakthrough. This radical possibility is allowed to permeate the threshold as a site of everyday complacency.
- 8 Bhabha's move in mobilising the stairwell as a symbol of the beyond is indicative of a larger impetus in cultural theory to mark the threshold as a point of transgression punctuated by both potentiality and irreversibility. In Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge*, the threshold certainly marks such a transgression. In the production and creation of bodies of knowledge, terms like 'threshold, rupture, break, mutation and transformation' signal spatio-temporal discontinuities (Foucault, 1992: 5). Deleuze reformulates this as follows: "knowledge exists only according to certain widely varying 'thresholds' which impose particular layers, splits and directions" (Deleuze, 2006: 44). The threshold here is a point of rupture, in which, for example, a theoretical transformation leads to the *establishment* of "a science by detaching it from the ideology of its past and by revealing this past as ideological" (Foucault, 1992: 5). This distribution of knowledge into individual clusters reveals the threshold as an irreversible break with the past.
- 9 Taking Foucault's cue, it might be worth pondering the suggestion raised by Bhabha that what is beyond the threshold is unknowable and unrepresentable. Foucault's study outlines the processes through which clusters of 'themes, images and opinions' (Foucault, 1992: 37) are transformed into discursive formations and consequently come to mark thresholds. As there is nothing among the elements that suggests a real continuity prior to the identification of the threshold, Foucault describes these clusters as 'fields of strategic possibilities' and 'systems of dispersion' (Foucault, 1992: 37). These 'fields of strategic possibilities' have no absolute or relative commonality that could predict the kind of discursive formation they come to represent. The threshold only appears once it has been breached. Its appearance marks a break

with a field or system and determines the shape of that field or system within the paradigm of continuity and internal consistency. The appearance of the threshold however, cannot predict the form of what is taking place past this point. Whatever is beyond the threshold has not yet been subject to the processes that will later make it knowable and representable.

10 In the archaeological ‘thresholds’ of knowledge, there is an echo of the ‘limit’ of ‘Preface to Transgression’ (Foucault, 2001). Like the empty core of the ‘limit’, the beyond of the threshold is not necessarily a productive space. Despite the unknowability and the unrepresentability of what lies beyond the threshold, what is certain is that one day it will be known and representable and that it will come to be seen as a certain type of knowledge with particular internal consistencies, characters and traits. What is beyond may be temporarily unknowable, but the real point of the threshold for Foucault, is to organise and classify what came before as it comes to possess the consistency and visibility of a discernable unit.

## Descending into the surface

11 One leisurely Sunday, as I was browsing through the wares of a second hand goods shop with my sister, I came across an old black and white photo album. If I hesitated for a moment as to whether or not this item was for sale, a little white sticker indicating that the price of the album was \$25 answered my doubts. Perhaps my surprise at the monetary exchange value of the album was unwarranted, particularly considering all the clichés that have come to pervade our cultural products today, like ‘everything is for sale’, or ‘people buy all sorts of things’.

12 When I reflected upon this however, I realised that it was not the monetary value assigned to the photos nor the fact that they were for sale that disturbed me, particularly as the existence of well-preserved photographic archives today provides us with so much of the material on which we base our understanding of the past and our relationship to photography as art, artifice, memory, construction, history and representation. Perhaps, if the photos had been in an archive, I might have thought little about them other than noting their historical specificity, their belonging to a particular time and place.

13 The photos were all black and white (with the exception of one that I will return to later) and they appeared to have been taken somewhere in Europe probably in the era immediately before the Second World War. They were mostly posed rather than natural and the recurring figure in the photos (probably the owner of the album) was a young woman. Some of the photos were posed in front of landmarks or monuments, others before landscapes, and others yet with friends or acquaintances. In that respect, they were not particularly exceptional, and they were notably reminiscent of other photographs of this era that I have seen elsewhere, in both family albums and in public archives.

14 Yet these photos were not in an archive. They had not been stripped of the personal resonances of the owner of the album. In neat cursive handwriting, the album’s owner had inscribed names and places beneath each photograph in German. Whatever dimension these handwritten captions added to this album on sale in an op-shop, it was above all else an insistence that these images were not examples of photography as the documentation of history. These were private photographs that had been assigned personal captions. The album itself added another personalising touch. It was an older style ring folder from the era before the invention of plastic sheeting. The photos had been glued two per page with reverse-order photos on facing pages allowing two people sitting opposite each other to view the album simultaneously. This was an album made for conversation and socialising.

15 The photos may have been posed but the presence of the album in a commercial context made it appear innocent and unguarded. Stuck in the crease between two pages was a single colour photo with nowhere to go. The album’s pages were all full, and anyway, this colour photograph, which showed the woman I assume to have been the album’s owner in her old age amid family or friends, did not belong with the more glamorous black and white photos that filled the other pages. Yet if this was indeed the album’s owner, the out of place colour

photograph left a pressing question which belonged to the materiality of the album rather than the photographs – who was this woman, claimed neither by family nor archive? Who was this woman, whose naïve and unassuming private world had not been purified for the public eye of the collection nor protected from it? Who was this woman whose personal life was for sale, breaking the laws of private sanctity and public officialdom simultaneously?

## Thresholds of photography

- 16 Were does one go after making such a discovery? Does one buy the album and protect it from public scrutiny, offering it the family shelter which it had been denied, or does one buy the album in order to offer it up to history as one more document on the shelf of the past? My response was to do neither, but to neatly return the album to the shelf from which I had picked it up and to resume browsing as though I had been snooping around a relative's house and found it by accident. This accident, followed by putting it back in its *rightful* place (which was inadvertently a denial and a critique of the place where it was) suggests that the private realm of the photographs, marked by the album rather than the images, was able to disturb the function of these images as artefact, document and representation. In the album, the threshold of private property set the limit of photography at the image. More than that, it cast a shadow over the images that simultaneously placed and misplaced them in a beyond that was unknowable and unrepresentable.
- 17 This disturbance could be seen as the product of a direct confrontation between what Laura Marks has termed 'Experience' and 'Information' in her model 'Experience-Information-Image'. "Why do certain images of history reach us," asks Marks, "while others remain seemingly forgotten...?" (Marks, 2008: 85). "Those experiences," Marks suggests, "are not forgotten but enfolded" (Marks, 2008: 85). Marks' notion of the past as 'enfolded' rather than forgotten, echoing Deleuze's thesis on Leibniz, suggests that the past "reaches us or becomes actual to us through selective unfolding, in a relationship between Experience, Information and Image" (Marks, 2008: 86).
- 18 The *relationship* between Experience, Information and Image that Marks unravels, suggests that while few images unfold directly from Experience, the level of Information – which is also the realm of capital, has a greater influence on what we see (Marks, 2008: 87-88). Most of our images, Marks tells us, "are selective unfoldings of Experience" and are determined by Information (Marks, 2008: 87-88). In effect, while a film may produce images from Experience, these are often selected and unfolded according to the interests of capital which determines what images are deemed worthy of circulation. It is important to note that what Marks refers to as Experience does not signify personal experience, but rather, "the history of all experiences" (Marks, 2008: 87). While Experience cannot be 'perceived', it can be "mediated through an Image" (Marks, 2008: 88). Similarly, when images are reabsorbed into the level of Experience, Marks describes them as returning to "a state of latency" (Marks, 2008: 88).
- 19 Marks' model of 'Experience-Information-Image' provides a valuable tool for thinking through the way that images circulate, become significant, or remain latent. Its application of the concepts of enfolding and unfolding elucidates the manner in which images seemingly appear and disappear. Marks retains the possibility of Images arising from Experience that avoid being filtered "into 'meaningful' narratives" through Information (Marks, 2008: 96). In Marks' triangular model however, the inability to 'perceive' Experience unless it has been mediated by the Image, also implies that the perceptible Image of Experience is necessarily, to varying degrees, processed through Information. In considering the mediation of Experience by Image and Information, I want to return to the question of how Image unfolds between Information and Experience in order to reconsider the disjuncture that the 'mis-placed' photo album ushers in. In my reading of the photo album as a disjuncture between Experience and

Information, however, I want to modify the original categories that Marks describes in order to consider a possibility that may not be sustainable from within the model. I will retain the use of the terms ‘experience’, ‘information’, ‘image’ without capitalisation in order to work with Marks’ model while indicating a move away from it.

20 In being disturbed by the photo album, I am particularly attuned to the way that images are classified as ‘useful’ and ‘useless’. These descriptions overlap somewhat with the categories of ‘information,’ which determines what is useful and worthy of circulation, and ‘experience,’ which retains those items that have no determined purpose. For photographs, a second-hand shop is a sort of purgatory, or a halfway house inhabited by unclaimed and unwanted images. The status of these objects underscores the economy of the image where value exists only if it has been ascribed. Ironically, the \$25 price tag on the album only works to highlight its worthlessness since a valuable image is priceless. Unclaimed by the archive, the album is free to roam the world. In remaining outside the archive however, the album is not free to offer up its images because, rather than being selected as useful, they are selectively ignored. Unselected by information, without an impetus to be unfolded as images, the album remains potentially enfolded in experience.

21 ‘Useless’ images here, does not suggest absolute uselessness, but it refers to images that have not been assigned a purpose, images which are of little interest. These images are not, properly speaking, latent since their circulation at any level implies some exchange between experience, information and image. They are ‘opaque’ rather than latent since it is not their circulation in the economy of images that is in question, but their value within such an economy. As such, they are ‘floating images’ in the sense that their unfolding and enfolding is sporadic and they remain unanchored. Rather than unfolding as an image of experience mediated through information, they are folded over by information to create an image of experience that is inaccessible. Theoretically speaking, they could also be folded over by experience to create an image of information.

22 In suggesting that the disturbance of the album is the product of a confrontation between information and experience, I want to maintain the possibility that this confrontation is ‘image-less’ in the sense that the ‘image’ is the fold, the friction, the fissure between information and experience rather than being an ‘image’ in a proper sense. Here, I am drawing from Deleuze’s reading of Foucault. In Foucault, Deleuze suggests, ‘everything is knowledge, and this is the first reason why there is no ‘savage experience’: there is nothing beneath or prior to knowledge’ (Deleuze, 2006: 90). Yet Deleuze goes on to reconcile the ‘beneath’ and the ‘prior’ of knowledge through the fold, ‘to think is to fold, to double the outside with a co-extensive inside’ (Deleuze, 2006: 97). If the image is the fold of information over experience, then it creates the illusion of experience rather than telling us something about it. As an image of experience, it is opaque; as an image of information, it floats unanchored above experience.

23 In this sense, the image is not always a proper image, but a fold and point of friction. The album as a physical container of the photographs could be seen as the image here since it folds the documentary and historical status of the photographs (their information value) over the realm of the personal that is merely glimpsed in the handwriting, the inscriptions and the arrangement of the photographs (their experience value). Rather than concealing the personal aspects of experience, the fold recreates them as marginalised elements.

24 In this event, the disturbance caused by the photo album on sale in an op-shop may not necessarily be a product of its ability to unfold images from experience and therefore confront us directly with what information would tend to ignore, but rather, with the fact that it collapses the category of image onto experience by alluding to the presence of an inside (experience) that has been replaced with an outside (information) in the form of a fold (image).

25 The disturbing element of the album is not the photographs, but the album itself as it collapses the image of experience (the album) directly onto the realm of experience. This fold of the

album over the personal world of its owner marks the threshold of photography by alluding to a beyond – the realm of experience and the personal – without being able to offer it up. Photography, Benjamin tells us, strips the object of its aura, “that strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance” (Benjamin, 1979: 250). Yet the manner in which these photographs are organised in the album, the cursive handwriting, the personal captions, does nothing if not return something of the singularity and uniqueness of the aura from where it has been emptied out. If the gaze of photography sacrifices intimacy for detail (Benjamin, 1979: 251), then the personal touches that hover around the album pervade the clinical detail of images emptied of their aura. This singularity recreates the album as imageless in the sense that it retains an aura not necessarily found in the photos themselves. The images hover at the level of information, useless today, useful tomorrow, but in any case easily detachable from the album and thus retaining an ability to exist independently of it in the archive. The photos do no more than shadow the threshold of photography.

## Inside the surface

- 26 Susan Sontag writes that ‘the problem is not that people remember *through* photographs, but that they remember only the photographs...this remembering *through* photographs eclipses other forms of understanding and remembering’ (Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*). Sontag’s allusion to the photograph as a *thoroughfare*, a place we can go *through* to arrive somewhere else, is also an invitation to read the photograph as a threshold. Yet how can we think of the photographic surface as a threshold, given that it is not permeable and that whatever memory we attribute to a photograph does not even *scratch the surface*? If the photographic surface is merely the imprint of light on paper, can it really take us anywhere *beyond*? Can the surface be anything more than the point at which things emerge or remain latent, appear and disappear, become visible or invisible?
- 27 In light of the desire to see the photograph as a thoroughfare, the fold of the image is a rude awakening, it curtails photography’s claim to memory by suspending us at the threshold rather than allowing us to believe in the image as a passage to another place, an outside, an inside, a beyond. However, conceiving of the photograph as a point of flux between two separate events, the capture of the image and its viewing, suggests that any link between the two events resides solely in the limits of photography, at the surface of the photograph. If we accept the analogy of the photograph as a passageway, we are nonetheless faced with its appearance as a one-way threshold. It seems that viewing the photograph can lead out onto the moment of its capture, but not vice-versa. In addition, the process of going *through* the photograph *into* the realm of memory seems to imply that the photograph conceals a depth which one reaches by breaking apart the surface. It seems to say, it is not the surface that we are interested in, but what it shows, says, means.
- 28 Inside the photograph, on the other side of the image – the other side of the fold – lies the realm of experience which can only be mediated through the image. In attempting to break apart the surface of the photograph to access experience directly, however, signification does not transcend the threshold of the image. Rather, the ‘memory’ we attribute to the photograph simply codes the surface with signification by reducing the beyond to an inside that can be articulated. How this inside is articulated, or how the image folds, is determined by what one wants to find.
- 29 Vaidehi Ramanathan tells us that historians are interested in the “seams between experiences, images and narratives” (Ramanathan, 2007: 52). Substituting information for narrative however, suggests that art theory is no less interested in the intersections between these three entities. Yet, it is not merely the choice of ‘narrative’ or ‘information’ that differentiates the two approaches, rather it is their emphasis. Narrative is at the heart of history, Ramanathan tells us, and it is narrative that drives the hermeneutics of the image and gives photographs



their value as objects of historical worth (Ramanathan, 2007: 52). Historicising a photograph replaces the image with a subtext, the photograph, with a text. If we maintain that what is beyond the threshold is unknowable and unrepresentable, then the narrativisation of the photograph neither breaks the surface nor accesses an inside, but rather, it collapses the distinction between inside (experience), surface (image), outside (narrative).

30 Perhaps at this point it is worth stating plainly that my intention here is not to critique this historical approach. Rather, as I hope should be clear by now and clearer when I pick up this point later, it is an insistence that the threshold of the photograph is forever slipping away, that its 'beyond' is still unknowable and unrepresentable. All the while, surface confounds depth.

31 Attempting to break apart the surface of the photograph, attempting to get inside, throws up the threshold as an obstacle. Even after the narratives have been set down, the threshold of the photograph continues to recede into the distance. We never access the 'beyond'.

32 How useful then, to maintain that the threshold is a passage between two spaces, or an opening onto a beyond and a point of rupture, or a transgression that cannot be reversed? What if the threshold of the photograph were not merely an access point, but an interruption or a suspension? What if the threshold were contained in the fold? What if the fold were not only an obstacle, a limitation on accessing experience, but also a potential, a disturbance of the surface? Or what if, as Ramanathan suggests, the image were an interruption of thought? (Ramanathan, 2007: 52).

33 If the photograph is an interruption, it interrupts synchronicity. If it is a suspension, it suspends time. Ramanathan's suggestion returns us to Bhabha and Benjamin: the threshold as a temporal slippage that is expressed spatially. The products of the threshold, whether narrative or image, are spatial expressions of this slippage. They are unable to capture or indicate the 'beyond', only the moment of suspension in which temporal slippage collapses such a distinction. The threshold of the photographic surface might indeed belong to the photograph's instantaneity, or the moment of its capture, rather than the moment of its interpretation. This threshold might well be the limit of the inside that is merely glimpsed in the folding over of the surface.

## Scratches of light

34 In the image from the collection of the Lebanese photographer Hashem El-Madani that I referred to at the beginning of this paper (Figure 1), the photographic surface is marked by a series of black lines. The year is 1957, the caption tells us, but the woman in the photograph is anonymous. Only later, in correspondence from the Arab Image Foundation do I stumble upon the label 'Baqari's Wife' – an interesting appellation given that all it tells us about the woman is that she was married to someone called 'Baqari'. In an interview with Akram Zaatari, El-Madani is asked about the black lines on the photograph (Zaatari, 2004: 14). The story recounted by El-Madani is of an angry man that came to see him because his wife had had her photos taken (by Madani) without his permission (Zaatari, 2004: 14). The husband, infuriated at this breach, confronted Madani and insisted that he hand over all the negatives. Madani refused, but agreed to scratch the surface of the negatives with a pin to placate the angry man. Many years later, the man returned to Madani's studio asking for reprints of any surviving photographs of his wife. The woman had burnt herself to death.

35 In the places where the negative has been damaged, light reaches the surface of the paper unimpeded, leaving firm black lines. It is the negative that filters the light, shades it so that the figures take to the paper, and the outlines resemble forms, not scratches. The scratched surface of the negative creates an image that is opaque from being over-lit since there is nothing on the negative to shade the paper. Jealousy takes the shape of an excess of light. The face is not hidden, but over illuminated. The expression 'to scratch the surface' reveals little about the dangers of the surface that a jealous husband is attuned to. The surface of the photograph is more than a surface, it is also depth and field. By scratching the negative, one does not 'scratch

the surface' of anything. Rather, one insists on the literality of the image as the imprint of light on paper.

36 To borrow from Baudrillard, the surface of the photograph contains the “literalness of the object, against meaning and the aesthetics of meaning” (Baudrillard, 2001: 140). While the literal function may be overshadowed by the ideological, aesthetic, political and intertextual, it nonetheless has little to do with meaning since the photographic gaze “settles ‘literally’ on the surface of things and illustrates their emergence in the form of fragments, for a very short spell of time – to be followed immediately by the moment of their disappearance” (Baudrillard 2001: 141). Interestingly, Baudrillard connects the literality of the image to its reliance on light which he describes as “the imagination of the image” (Baudrillard, 2001: 141) since it evidences the “luminous materiality of things” (Baudrillard, 2001: 142) and signals the “ellipsis of meaning” (Baudrillard, 2001: 142).

37 The scratched surface brings the representative function of the photograph into direct confrontation with its materiality. Like the mis-placed album, the scratches fold the image over experience. The scratches hide nothing (how could an overexposure of light ‘hide’ anything?). Rather, they offer themselves up as an element of the surface that repels the gaze and dispels perception. In the same sense that it is difficult to look directly at a source of bright light, one might struggle to focus on the scratches. This luminous materiality does not belong to *things*, but to *nothing*. It is the literal emptiness beneath the black lines that interrupts the direction of the gaze and its movement towards perception and interpretation.

## Gaze and perception

38 More than an enquiry into the ethics of photography, Susan Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others* is an interrogation of the gaze. Why do we look at horrific images, we might ask rather than, what do we see? How do we look? How does this looking affect us? Sontag is critical of modernity’s culture of image consumption as well as the reduction of the image to simulation and simulacra in Baudrillard or spectacle in Debord.

39 To speak of reality becoming a spectacle is a breathtaking provincialism. It universalizes the viewing habits of a small, educated population living in the rich part of the world, where news has been converted into entertainment (Sontag, 2003: 110).

40 Yet it seems that opening up the gaze to questioning does not necessarily transcend the threshold of looking nor transform looking into seeing. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes distinguishes between looking and seeing, suggesting that the ‘inconceivable distortion’ of the photograph is looking (gaze) without seeing (perception) (Barthes, 1981: 111). Why is seeing so difficult?

41 The scratches on the Madani photograph are a prohibition on looking. They mark the threshold between looking and seeing. They are intended to cover the face, secure its anonymity and in doing so resurrect the husband’s claim over the woman’s body and its image, but also, remove that body from the path of the gaze. They mark the line of the gaze towards the face by interrupting it. The *piercing* gaze that searches the image for depth, for narrative, breaks apart at the surface rather than breaking the surface apart.

42 The scratches also mark the splitting of the photographer’s gaze and the viewer’s. That the photographer’s gaze belongs to a privileged realm of vision which cannot be reproduced in the photograph is doubly evident in the scratches: the photographer saw what the viewer cannot see. The slippage between gazes, between photographer and viewer is momentarily suspended. The scratches disrupt the image, they are a superficial *punctum* in the sense that they reside only in the surface, and yet it is the surface that confounds the depth of the photograph.

43 What Barthes calls the punctum in his reflections on photography in *Camera Lucida* is the ‘detail’ that simultaneously attracts and disturbs (Barthes, 1981: 42).

44 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...punctum* is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole – and also a cast of the dice (Barthes, 1981: 26-27).

45 In punctum, Barthes finds both *puncture* and *punctuation*. In effect, the punctum is marked by its ‘power of expansion’: it is at once a metonym, replacing the medium with the object, but also an extension that ‘fills in the whole picture’ from a detail (Barthes, 1981: 45). In both cases, puncture becomes punctuation whether through metonymy (the puncture replaces punctuation) or extension (the puncture punctuates).

46 In her reading of ethics and vision, Nicola Foster points out that the terms used by Barthes to describe the *punctum* are “also used by Lacan to describe the gaze” (Foster, 2008: 83). By extending this observation a little further, and reading the punctum as the inversion of the gaze (or the photograph ‘looking back’ – something that Foster touches on at the end of her paper), it may be possible to mark the threshold of the gaze.

47 In the *puncture*, the punctum pierces the surface of the photograph and in doing so *punctuates* it by indicating the limits of the gaze. The punctum as the inversion of the gaze, as puncture and punctuation in the image, accesses the photographic surface easily while restricting the viewer’s entry to it. If the punctum is the point at which the photograph returns the gaze, it also marks the threshold of the viewer’s gaze (rather than the photographer’s). If one reads the scratches as punctum, as the photograph returning the gaze, then it is not difficult to see how the observation that the punctum “saves reference” by “suspending” the referent (Haverkamp, 1993: 270) could be translated into a returned gaze that also marks the desire to suspend the presence of the woman in the image. This is not surprising perhaps, given the punctum’s capacity to be many things, among them, a wound at the heart of the image.

## From thresholds to *soglitudes*

48 More than once, I have heard photographs described as objects in which *stories rise to the surface*. For some photographs, it is difficult to imagine their existence without ‘a story’. The narrative threshold of the photograph is one of translation, albeit translation in the Derridean sense of being transformed (Derrida, 1972: 31). It marks a shift from visibility to discourse.

49 The narrative threshold of the Madani photograph indicates the point at which the scratches on the surface are ‘interpreted’ and transformed into a story that comes to precede the image. The gaze may not be able to scratch the surface, but that does mean that the image remains static under its weight. Perhaps the scratches on the surface could be interpreted as a symbol of the secluded lives of women during a certain historical period in Lebanon, or considered as evidence that ‘Middle Eastern’ women continue to face proscriptions on their freedom. In either case, the gaze of the viewer folds the image into a narrative that comes to represent the inaccessible inside of the image.

50 In his reading of Foucault, Deleuze highlights the former’s later rejection of the subtitle of his book *The Birth of the Clinic*, which had been “an archaeology of the gaze” (50). The premise of this rejection, according to Deleuze, is that the light which makes things visible cannot be reduced to an instance of looking, any more than the visible can be reduced to an instance of seeing (Deleuze, 2006: 50). By circling around the outline of the image, the work of René Magritte brings us face to face with the limits of perception. A work like *Personnage marchant vers l’horizon*, for example, encloses the elements of the landscape within amorphous black shapes defined only by a designated word: ‘nuage’, ‘fusil’, ‘horizon’, ‘cheval’ (Foucault, 1983: 74). In Magritte, we are faced with an interruption in the perception of the image as an extension of vision. Perhaps Magritte’s work answers Wittgenstein’s question, “but how is it possible to *see* an object according to an *interpretation*?” (Wittgenstein, 1981: 200). At the same time it seems to reinforce Wittgenstein’s notion that “the eye is not in the perceptual field that it surveys” (Critchley, 1999: 60). If as Deleuze claims, Foucault succeeded in turning phenomenology into epistemology, then Magritte’s work is the visual reminder of

this transformation. Against Merleau-Ponty's insistence on the proprioceptivity of vision, its immersion in the body of the see-er (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 17-18), Magritte's work insists on the threshold of vision as an operation of thought.

51 The gaze that folds Madani's image into a narrative and that refolds that narrative into an image reverses nothing. The difference between the two operations is described by what Wittgenstein referred to as a shift in aspect. Shown a picture of a 'duck-rabbit' I reply, 'It's a picture-duck' only to say again 'Now it's a picture-rabbit' (Wittgenstein, 1981: 194). In doing so, I have *described* "the alteration like a perception; quite as if the object had altered before my eyes" (Wittgenstein, 1981: 195). The Madani image and its story stage this shift in aspect. While changing nothing in the image, the story changes the image.

52 What the photograph can tell us about the past (history) is never free of what the photograph can tell us about the future (ethics). If the threshold collapses past and future into a spatial figuration that is only an outline of that breach, then the narrative threshold of the image indicates this transgression as a suspension and disturbance of the surface, rather than a move beyond. Narrative reorganises nothing, narrative reorganises everything. The disturbance of narrative is retained in the fold as both the coding of the surface and the inversion of the gaze. The surface of the photograph expresses a 'state on the threshold', a 'soglitude,' and yet, this state is barely visible.

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### ***À propos de l'auteur***

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### ***Droits d'auteur***

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### ***Abstract / Résumé***

At once a material object and a multitude of paths, the photograph is a useful place to begin thinking about the threshold. In the photograph we might dwell on the nuances of the threshold, its ability to be an 'inbetween' and a gateway to a 'beyond' simultaneously. Indeed, the

photograph offers both possibilities. The work of Bhabha, Benjamin and Sontag elucidates this slippage. In this uncertainty, 'inbetween' and 'beyond' signal another productive intersection.

The liminality of the threshold marks this terrain as a spatial transgression that ushers in a temporal disjuncture. The threshold is a shadow zone, as ordinary as a stairwell and as transformative as a breakthrough. In attempting to map the threshold, the paper borrows from Deleuze and Marks on enfolding and unfolding as a means through which knowledge becomes accessible, or remains concealed. To some extent, mapping the threshold is a process that begins unfolding from the discussion of surface, gaze and perception. Yet despite these markers, mapping the threshold of photographs proves difficult and elusive. In this respect, Wittgenstein's notion of 'seeing aspects' helps explain the way that the threshold always exceeds our attempts at mapping and defies perception. The paper examines this impasse through the 'fold of the surface', an action which transgresses the flatness of the image without altering it. Perhaps this is the closest we can be to the threshold without holding it.

**Keywords :** zone, photograph, unfolding, surface, memory, liminality, in-between, gaze

À la fois objet matériel et multitude de chemins, la photographie est un lieu privilégié pour commencer à réfléchir sur le seuil. Dans la photo, nous pouvons nous attarder sur les nuances du seuil, son caractère simultané d'« entre-deux » et de portail vers un « au-delà » en même temps. En effet, la photo offre en effet ces deux possibilités. Les travaux de Bhabha, Benjamin et Sontag éclaircissent ce glissement. Dans cet incertain, l'« entre-deux » et l'« au-delà » donnent lieu à une autre intersection productive. La liminalité du seuil marque ce terrain comme une transgression spatiale qui se précipite vers une disjonction temporelle. Le seuil est une zone d'ombre, aussi commun qu'une cage d'escalier et aussi révolutionnaire qu'une percée. Dans une tentative d'établir une carte du seuil, cet article emprunte à Deleuze et Marks l'idée du pli et du déploiement comme moyen à travers lequel le savoir devient accessible ou reste dissimulé. Dans une certaine mesure, cartographier le seuil est un processus qui commence le déploiement par la discussion de la surface, du regard et de la perception. Cependant, malgré ces repères, ce procédé reste difficile et fuyant. Dans ce sens, la notion de Wittgenstein des « angles de vues » aide à expliquer la manière dont le seuil dépasse toujours nos efforts d'en tracer un plan et esquive la perception. Cet article examine cette impasse à travers « le pli de la surface », un acte qui transgresse le plan de l'image sans l'altérer. C'est peut-être ainsi que nous pouvons nous approcher le plus du seuil sans le tenir.

**Mots clés :** zone, surface, regard, photographie, mémoire, liminalité, entre-deux, déploiement