

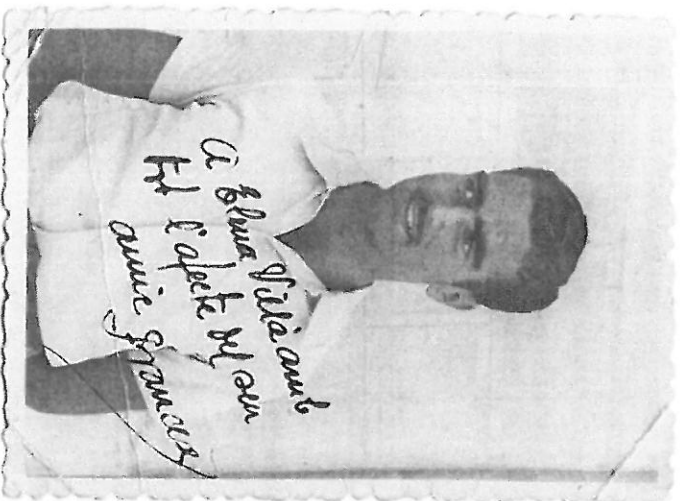
# I PHOTOGRAPH, THEREFORE I AM

In the photograph that your eyes make sweet  
There is your face in profile, your mouth, your hair,  
But when we pulsed with love  
Beneath the surf of the night and the clamor of the city  
Your face is a land always unknown  
And that photograph oblivion, a different thing.

Juan Gelman, 'Photo', *Velorio del solo* [Solitary Vigil], 1961

We all have our own particular relationships with photography. I owe it my life. Not for having saved it, but for having given it to me. We have photography to thank – or to blame – for my being here.

This should not be taken as a figurative expression. The fact is, though, that it could easily be so, because for more than a third of a century photography has been my passion and the activity that fills my life with meaning. Nor are we hinting at some philosophical undercurrent, despite the resonances it spontaneously engenders in the mind. Descartes propounded the *Cogito, ergo sum*, to which his contemporary Gassendi responded *Ambulo, ergo sum*. Descartes existed thanks to thought, Gassendi thanks to movement and action. Nowadays we exist thanks to images: *Imago, ergo sum*. The adaptation of the corollary to our condition as *Homo pictor* gives us 'I photograph, therefore I am', because there is no doubt that the camera has become one of the vital contraptions that encourage us to venture into the world and traverse it both visually and intellectually; whether we realise it or not, photography is also a form of philosophy. This being so, perhaps we should refine the scope of that proposition by breaking it down into at least two variants: in the hortatory periphrastic mode, 'I photograph, therefore I exist' (because the camera



Portrait of Francesc Fontauberta, the author's father. Photographer unknown, 1944.

effectively certifies existence), and in the passive, 'I am photographed, therefore I exist', in which form the aphorism will sound familiar to anyone who has wrestled with those theoretical reflections that derive from Benjamin (it is the presence of the camera that makes an event historifiable).

But let's put aside these arguments for now. I would like to start, as I said at the outset, with something less metaphorical and closer to home, namely the fact that there is a photograph at the very origin of my life. One blessed night in June 1954, one of my father's intrepid sperm found its way to a receptive ovum of my mother's, occasioning my humble self, and among the concatenation of reasons for this great encounter, vital for my conception, is a prosaic, wallet-size black and white photographic portrait. This is a beautiful and charming family story; allow me to recount it.

Back in the final months of the Spanish Civil War, my father managed to miss being called up in the *Leva del biberón* draft of seventeen-year-olds. But once the war was over and the new regime had installed itself in power he could not avoid the long and wearisome military service he had to do in colonial Melilla, with the Cazadores de Villaviciosa 14th Cavalry Regiment, to be specific. In close proximity, almost all of northern Africa had been turned into a bloody theatre of operations between the Allies and the Axis forces. The Spanish garrison was engaged not so much in protecting Spain's sovereign possession from possible insurgent actions by the Kabyle but rather ensuring Franco a reasonable amount of peace of mind, fearful as he was that one or other of the combatant sides would be tempted to occupy the Protectorate. But nothing ever did happen, apart from formations of warplanes passing overhead or reluctant missions to rescue some pilot shot down and lost.

Time went by slowly and tediously. The turbulence of the World War considerably lengthened the tour of duty of the garrison, even though the letter of the conscription law of 1940 limited service in the ranks to two years. On top of that, leave tended to be scarce. My father's draft spent three years locked up in barracks, bounded by the outer slums of Melilla, the sea and the desert. With no other entertainment than climbing Mount Gurugú to read the adventures of Zorro in the shade of the prickly pears, or going to the old town for a glass or two of cheap wine, or to the double bill of movie and No-Do newsreel on weekends, it is hardly surprising that homesickness and boredom should have given rise to other kinds of activity. The young men had the idea of swapping the addresses of damsels of courtly age. The plan was to make use of the stock of female contacts they all had in their respective places of origin. The most gifted in epistolary literature drafted a letter loaded with the shared

sentiments of nostalgia and loneliness, with a view to arousing compassion and affection in the hearts of those young girls in flower who had the good fortune to remain at home in the bosom of their families, and leading on to request an innocent exchange of correspondence. Many years later my father was still able to recite from memory sundry passages of that corny and melodramatic tract whose subsequent airing occasioned much mirth in our family gatherings: 'Young lady: I will not disclose the details of how I obtained your address as this is a secret in the relationship I am seeking to achieve with you. What shall I say of myself? Understand only that I am a soldier of the Spanish army, separated from his family and friends beyond the tranquil sea, for whom the days do not follow one another with the desired swiftness...'

The addresses of the girls were shared out among the boys, who hurried to write out several copies of the original manuscript. The letters were sent, leaving behind them a mist of expectation.

My mother, who was among the numerous addressees, found the letter cringe-inducing and nerdy in style, as well as being written in a language that for both sender and receiver was foreign and imposed. She replied, but demanded that the affected tone be dropped. The letters that passed between them over the next few weeks bore witness to reciprocity of feeling. In one of them, my father, who subsequently became a very successful advertising professional, had the happy idea of including a photograph of himself. My mother was smitten by the handsome character who had burst so impudently into her life, and even now, more than 60 years later, relates with a twinkle in her eyes how the mere revelation of his face won her heart at first sight. Above and beyond simple curiosity, something in that portrait seduced her. The words of the correspondence that followed gained her love, and some years later they married. Naturally, an amorous relationship that has lasted over half a century is not constructed so lightly, but that episode laid its foundations. I am not surprised that nowadays some couples establish romantic relationships via the Internet, and we should not forget that from the Renaissance on many portraits have been used ambassadorially, as a form of introduction with a view to arranging a marriage between members of different dynasties or noble lineages.

Though my father has no precise memory of this, his portrait was probably taken by an itinerant photographer in Melilla, one of those affectionately known as *minuteros* or 'minutemen' because they undertook to hand over the photograph 'in one minute'. Of course, this special class of street photographer has long gone, a casualty of technical progress, but a few decades ago

they were still to be found in popular tourist resorts. Their *modus operandi* seems very curious to us today. They used a large-format camera that also doubled as a darkroom. With the camera mounted on a tripod, they set up the subject, the inverted image was projected onto a sheet of abraded glass to allow them to compensate for a shaky focus, and in many cases, for want of a shutter they would obtain the exposure by removing the lens cap for a few seconds. Paper rather than film was used for the negative, which was developed and fixed in trays inside the camera itself. Still wet, the negative was then placed in front of the lens and photographed again. In this second shot the tones were reversed, and the chemical process was repeated to obtain a positive in which the tones of the original subject were restored. The paper was briskly rinsed in a bucket of water to remove residual acids and the customer went away with a still damp photo whose precarious fixing did not augur a long life.

Nevertheless, our foundational portrait has survived with its yellowish patina attesting to an exquisite ageing. The ink of the dedication that my father duly inscribed on it, revealing the names of the protagonists, stands out against silver salts decidedly in retreat. Although a portrait of this kind required the subject to remain immobile for quite some time for the preparations and the actual shot, the face looks relaxed and natural: a broad forehead, bushy eyebrows (a family trait, received with differing degrees of satisfaction according to the gender of the offspring), twinkling eyes, a smile somewhere between spontaneous and false, as of one stoically and good-humouredly enduring the trial of a lengthy pose. In all probability the minuteman would have known to a nicety the best light and location, with an enveloping softness, protectively shaded from a day that we sense was hot and sunny, with a plain wall for the background, slightly off centre. The tanned skin contrasts with the whiteness of the shirt, preserving the qualities of tonal range. The eyes are looking to one side, shyly avoiding the axis of the camera, an axis that is the paradigm of all the gazes that would in future be leveled at him, at his image deposited on that scrap of paper.

What makes a face captured in this way provoke such warm feelings? What were the decisive features without which the effect would not have been produced? What would have happened if the photograph had been technically flawed? Or the other way around, what if it had been retouched in the cheesily smug manner made fashionable by glamorous leading men and actresses? On what are the laws of photogenicity based?

It was the early avant-garde French filmmakers who coined the term 'photogenic': Louis Delluc and Jean Epstein suggested in the early twenties that

the soul (the 'inner truth' that also obsessed Dziga Vertov in his *Kino-Pravda* series) could be captured and isolated in a potent image. They saw the camera as possessing an all but magical power to transform; the capacity to condense an ephemeral intensity that, once revealed, was destined to shine for a few seconds before fading. This concentrated, fleeting brilliance could also manifest itself in photography: 'The lens is capable of invoking photogenicity and exuding it between its focal planes'. Photogenicity is not an exclusive property of reality or a mere effect of the optical mechanism or the result a trick of the operator; it stems instead from a necessarily three-way alliance between the subject, the camera and the photographer. Photogenicity only appears as the flash of a sublimating latent power that cannot be controlled. It can only be conjured up, invited, entreated; propitious conditions can be prepared, but as in prayer or the invocations of spiritualists, whether photogenicity responds to the call is entirely dependent on the designs of providence. Naturally, many later critics were unhappy with the excessively subjective weakness and the almost unacceptable mysticism of that formulation. For example, one can speak of the picturesque as an aesthetic category, they argued, but photogenicity eludes rigorous scientific examination just as the soul resists any objectification.

And yet we insist on seeing the human face as the mirror of the soul, at once the most intimate and the most external aspect of the subject, the screen on which her psychological interiority meets the coercion to which public life subjects her. The face is at once the site of revelation and of simulation, of indiscretion and concealment, of spontaneity and deceit – in other words, of all that permits the configuration of identity. In front of a camera one is always different: the goal makes us the designers and managers of our own 'other'. Roland Barthes tells us that mutation is inevitable: 'Once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of "posing", I instantaneously make another body for myself, transform myself in advance into an image'.<sup>1</sup> It follows that the resulting portrait is nothing but one possible mask, a mask that is struck to the individual like a shield put up in the confrontation of gazes which expresses states beyond expression. 'There resonates through that mask', Eugenio Trias writes in the catalogue of *La última mirada. Autorretratos de las postrimerías*,<sup>2</sup> 'the hieratic silence of the sacred, which invades the face and the eyes to fix them in a kind of rigid and majestic repose. There is not the slightest indication of movement, of dynamism or of potential force that could be deployed in their faces, converted, in their crossing of the boundary, into authentic sacred material'.

No doubt the conscript Fontcuberta was completely unaware of these intimations of sacralisation, and of the rest of these reflections, but driven by necessity he knew how to make use of the human instinct for that accelerated intelligence called intuition: he trusted more to providence than to the anonymous minuteman for the conduct of the photo session. Beyond the smiling face we intuit the assent of a hidden order; from the sublimation there comes a sort of affability, a suspension in time, an unconditional surrender to the other's gaze. In the features of his face there is a glowing, auratic affective resonance that deploys its power of seduction. Sacred material? Who knows? Catalysed perhaps by a divine breath or an inexplicable epiphany, the alchemy of these silver salts was to engender more consequences than the already wonderful miracle of the image.

What was it in that portrait that captivated my mother? To return to the Barthes of *Camera Lucida*, the thing that triggers the sequence of thoughts that leads him to explain the concepts of punctum and studium is another portrait, of his mother in a winter garden. However, Barthes chose not to reproduce this portrait in the book, limiting himself to describing it instead, because he understood that the punctum is informed by personal experiences that are not transferable. The punctum, 'that which is given as an act of grace', only interacts with the experience – private by nature – of a particular observer. The image of the winter garden symbolically replaces a missing loved one and would therefore fail to illustrate to anyone else the idea of a punctum that condenses, precisely for Barthes alone, a profound sense of loss.

For our *maître à penser*, photography embodies a symbolic death. The click of the shutter gullotines time, freezes the gesture, fossilises the body. Every photograph is a promise of eternity, at the cost of our seeing ourselves as future corpses: the image remains when the body is no more. And if, for Barthes, photography kills, for Kracauer what it really seeks to do is banish the memory of death. In a much earlier essay,<sup>3</sup> Kracauer took note of a portrait of his grandmother as a young woman, when she was a film star, and compared it with the mental image he had of her. Photography, for Kracauer, did not help to recall the essence; on the contrary, it distorted memory. 'The human being is not who he appears to be in his photograph, but the sum of what can be extracted from him. Photography destroys him when it portrays him... The features of men are conserved only in their history'. If we take photographs it is in order to hold fast to moments of life and so forget the existence of death. The mission of photography would thus be to eclipse the very idea of death.

Far removed from these glum necrolatries, I see photography, on the contrary, as linked to life rather than to death, so I have no problem in publishing the photograph of my father. And not just because it is surrounded by circumstances that are heartwarming, undramatic, but also because I am convinced that there, where the photograph as a manifestation of life cannot reach, we still have words, which are another effective way of constructing ourselves. And there is also, and above all, the capacity for empathy from the viewer. In short, we humans tend to share a stock of common experiences: joy and pain, happiness and suffering, love and hate....

But if readers are unable, even with the background set out for them, to grasp the condition of punctum in the portrait of my father, I do not find that troubling. For this particular chapter of our history the only thing that matters is that that punctum went straight to my mother's heart. As if Cupid and Barthes had joined forces. Heirs of that punctum (for the time being and as far as we know) are another three generations of Fontcubertas. And as far as you are concerned, dear reader, it is also thanks to that punctum that you have this book in front of you and are reading these lines today.

And I constructed your face.  
With divinations of love, I set about constructing your face  
In the far-away playgrounds of childhood.  
A bashful mason,  
I hid from the world to carve your image.  
To give you voice,  
To put sweetness in your saliva.

Juan Gelman, 'Love Factories', *Velorio del solo* (Solitary Vigil), 1961 (bearing the poet's name, but it could have been that of the Melilla minuteman).

<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, (Hill and Wang, New York, 1981) [*La Chambre claire. Note sur la photographie*, (Cahiers du Cinéma/Gallimard/Seuil, Paris, 1980)]. Notice to surfers: Barthes will be our frequent companion throughout these chapters, and his turtleneck calls to mind an anecdote I heard from Bas Vroeghe, editor of the Rotterdam-based magazine *Perspektief* from 1980 to 1993. The editorial board of this publication regularly got together to decide on content and its members used to engage in discussions in which the name of Barthes featured profusely; so profusely that they decided that there should be a penalty for mentioning Barthes: every time a member of the group did so, he or she would have to treat the others to a beer. I suppose the system introduced some moderation. In my case, I hope to be exempted from any such penalty, otherwise I shall have to devote almost all of my earnings from this book to buying beer for its readers.

<sup>2</sup> MACBA, Barcelona, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, 'Photography', in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin, (Harvard University Press, 1995) ['Die Photographie' first published in *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 28 October 1927. Reprinted in *Das Ornament der Masse*, (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt, 1963)].