

## On Photographing Nature: From Mimesis to Play

Maria Romanova-Hynes

*A photograph acquires something of the dignity which it ordinarily lacks when it ceases to be a reproduction of reality and shows us things that no longer exist.*

Marcel Proust, quoted in Eduardo Cadava's *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History* (1997)

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Between 2016 and 2018, I lived in a remote cottage in the west of Ireland. Surrounded by the mountains, the ocean and the open fields, I developed an interest in landscape photography, a genre conventionally associated with images portraying nature. But as I tried to capture “nature,” I could not escape the feeling that my endeavour was futile. For even if I chose to ignore the complexity of the debate on what constitutes nature and simply pointed my lens at a natural scene, I understood that where I was standing and what I was looking at could never be contained within the image.

Although I started taking photographs long before then, it was my experience with landscape photography that fractured my relationship with the art. Had I been confronted with the task of photographing a person, I would have been satisfied with pressing the shutter and taking their likeness, believing that, indeed, it captured them (a belief that I came to reassess later). But nature evaded me. In all its vastness, all I could depict was absence. Mimetic representation as such seemed to have failed to represent: none of the likenesses of “nature” I took convincingly portrayed it. It was never enough.

Why, then, were images of people “enough” to me? Why did I think a person’s presence could be represented? The answer to this question, perhaps, lies in the deceptive certainty of historical time that puts its own mark on the image: it is relatively easy to locate a person within a system of spatial and temporal coordinates, to

assign them a certain age, a certain place and a certain meaning. Presence is a feature of existence that lends itself to identifiability. Nature, however, belongs to a different temporal scale: its time is measured in aeons, and, as such, it contains our historical time. Since nothing is exempt from demise, this overbearing aspect of nature can only be called “timeless” in relation to one’s own limited time. Can the photograph contain this relation? For when the photographer locks a view into a frame, they fix their relative position not to time but to physical objects. Nature slips away, and what remains is a particular landscape: another form of an identifiable presence.

This research, therefore, was born out of my frustration with photography. Landscape imagery prompted me to address the fundamental question of technological representation: What constitutes presence and absence within the photographic frame? My aim was to produce a photograph that would invoke the idea of nature by transcending the denotational value of the image, making it affectual rather than descriptive. If nature were to be represented as I perceived it, its image would have to function not just as a sign but engage the spectator, suggesting the relationality and interplay between the observer and the observed.

Without getting too far ahead of myself, I will note that the conundrum I faced originated from a realisation that landscape and nature were not identical. My landscape photographs denoted their referents—the mountains, the ocean and the fields—and drained them of their agency. Instead of involving the spectator as a participant, engaged with the world unfolding in time, the images divorced them from the living phenomena. My task as a photographer was to find a mode of photographic signification that would enliven nature by eliciting the viewer’s response to it. Somehow the photograph had to possess not only a signifying but *experiential* quality of that which it attempted to signify. To simply point the camera and announce that “this is a mountain” rendered all signification hollow.

Confronted by the question of whether it is possible to photograph nature at all, in this article I set out to explore how the photograph can capture phenomena, perception and meaning. Firstly, I examine the problematics of frontal, static depictions of

natural scenes from a phenomenological perspective and discuss the failure of a traditional landscape photograph to account for the experience of being in the phenomenal world. Next, I turn to Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida's ruminations on signification in order to identify how meaning gets into the photographic image. I thus critique the structuralist denotation of presence and offer a post-structuralist reflection on a photograph that captures the indeterminacy of reality in its perpetual play of meaning. Finally, I put forward a deconstructivist interpretation of an aftermath photograph—portraying absence at the site of a historical tragedy—and claim that by focusing on that which lies outside the frame this photograph engages the subjectivity of the spectator, revitalising the image with the phenomenal experience of envisioning one's being in nature.

I therefore argue that one possible way to address the discrepancy between the traditional landscape photograph and the phenomenal experience of the world is to reconsider nature photography on the basis of the performative characteristics of aftermath photography, which can, via its focus on contextualised absence, imbue the depicted "nature" with agency. To discern how nature can (or cannot) be signified photographically, I engage both with theory, delineating the semantics of the photographic image, and photography, used as a mode of experimental inquiry. This article brings these two strands of my research together and initiates a dialogue between philosophy and artistic practice in order to probe what photography depicts when it "captures" nature and to indicate how the latter evades capture. I will thus attempt to show that to photograph nature one must not just signify the *this-ness* of the scene but cultivate the experience of *partaking-in-it*.

### **Through the phenomenological lens: inhabiting the landscape**

During my stay in the area of Connemara, Ireland, I regularly went for walks on a long sandy beach. Most months of the year the Atlantic wind was so harsh it cut through to the bone, the sky was grey and heavy, and the air was permeated with rain. Although I never regretted the lack of "good" weather, when the sun did come out it was a sight to behold. More often than not it did not stay for a day but for a spell and quickly disappeared behind the clouds. It was

on one such walk that I took the landscape photograph that, for the purposes of this article, I shall name *Captured by the Mountain*.

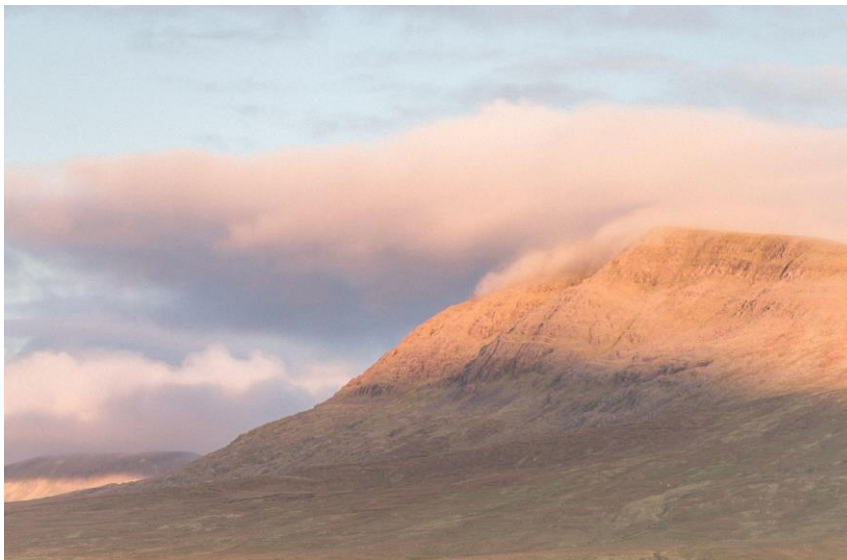


Figure 1: *Captured by the Mountain* (M. Romanova-Hynes, 2016)

Colloquially, it is often said that a photograph can “capture a moment.” Naturally, in a world marked by transience, one tries to memorialise change. But the photograph is a deceptive memorial, as behind its edifice lies a denial of time slipping away, and within this mutable time, there exist equally mutable places. To be in an environment is to perceive its indeterminacy: to listen, to see, to touch, to smell, to observe. The act of taking a photograph, however, halts this continuous and ephemeral experience. It takes the astute observer out of this perceptual and sensing mode, prompting them to cast a momentary impression into an image of the world that has already vanished.

On my walk that evening, when the sun suddenly came out and spilled its light onto a mountain, I felt compelled to respond to the moment by writing it in light.<sup>1</sup> It was an instance of perceptible mutability, in which I could see the shadow of the clouds move across the mountain, as the whole scene became submerged in

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<sup>1</sup> The word “photography” is a compound of the Greek *phōtós* (meaning “light”) and *graphé* (meaning “writing”).

bright crimson. The change from grey to fluorescent pink was striking enough, but it was the mountain that drew my attention. For even though I had passed by it many times, never before had it arrested my thought and my senses. Never before had I found myself standing *in relation* to it. In a way, I did not capture a moment. Rather, it captured me. After a short delay I took the landscape photograph perhaps in an attempt to collect myself.

How can landscape be defined? According to Lucy Lippard, the word traces its history to the fifteenth-century German *Landschaft*, which means “shaped land, a cluster of temporary dwellings . . . the antithesis of the wilderness surrounding it.”<sup>2</sup> In the seventeenth century, the Dutch *landschap*, or *landskip*, embraced the additional sense of ideational representation by acquiring the meaning of a “painting of such a place, perceived as a scope, or expanse.”<sup>3</sup> Contemporary language, however, gives the concept a much broader scope. As Ali Shobeiri suggests, “landscape” can designate any of the following: “nature, habitat, artefact, system, problem, wealth, ideology, history, aesthetic and, finally, . . . place, depending on what attributes and qualities individuals elicit from and assign to it.”<sup>4</sup> Landscape, therefore, is not just a spatial term, for it also describes a relationship to a place, or a nexus of relationships formed within a place. Landscape marks one’s mode of involvement with a unique locale. Ultimately, Shobeiri concludes that “landscape is not something to project, but to encounter as a conglomerate of things in the phenomenal world.”<sup>5</sup>

Hence, my photograph resulted from my encounter with the mountain. However, after I took the image, I had to admit that it captured the environment but nothing of my encounter: the photograph seemed void. It arrested neither my thought nor my senses. The mountain, which had previously captivated me, was present within the frame, but now, flat and photographed, it seemed as though dead, eternalised in an embalmed moment. The light of the evening no longer danced on its surface, bringing it forth out of the usual grey and putting it back to sleep. An experience that was

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Shobeiri, *Place*, 113.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*, 114.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*, 29.

dynamic in nature was converted into a stasis and emptied of time. Instead of capturing the being of a phenomenal world and inviting me to partake in it, the image prompted me to project an interpretation over it. My photograph shaped nature, subdued it and made it into an “it.” An easily identifiable object.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests that human language and perception are inherently anthropocentric, as humans position other things in relation to their bodily and mental spatial projections.<sup>6</sup> It is habitually said, for instance: “I stood *in front of* the mountain,” rather than “I stood *below* the mountain,” or “the mountain stood *over* me.” The photograph shares this linguistic orientation and locates the mountain on the eyeline of the spectator, who ends up looking at the image from above. For an attentive photographer, this change in perspective can be dizzying. In my memory, my body was a thing among other things as the mountain towered above me. Moreover, my body was not separate from the ever-mutable world. In Merleau-Ponty’s words, the body is “sensitive to all the rest . . . [it] reverberates to all sounds, vibrates to all colours . . .”<sup>7</sup> My photograph, however, reduces the mountain to a self-contained, fixed presence, while at the same time allowing me to look over it. In the living environment of interrelated phenomena, the mountain affected me. But in the representational environment of the photograph, I inadvertently used its image for effect.

While my image eternalises the duration of sunshine in the west of Ireland, reality was much more variegated: the sun disappeared as quickly as it had appeared, and the wind felt cold again. As such, the presence of the mountain can be perceived as “self-contained” only within the image’s frame. Outside of the frame, it was never fixed. Aware of the photograph’s ability to dissociate objects from the phenomenal world, Jean Baudrillard suggests that it can only capture “vanished presence.”<sup>8</sup> Within the split second of the photograph’s emergence, the camera registers, paraphrasing Siegfried Kracauer, not nature that exists within a

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<sup>6</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 116.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*, 275.

<sup>8</sup> Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, 58.

space-time continuum but a single aspect of it, which is “the sum of everything that can be subtracted from [it].”<sup>9</sup>

So, what does the photograph actually depict? Does it cut a particular moment out of the environment’s space-time continuum—a moment discovered by the photographer; or, does it constitute something that was never there in the first place? Jacques Derrida observes that in photographic practice “the simple recording of the other . . . as he appeared there . . . is immediately contaminated by invention in the sense of production, creation, productive imagination.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, at the moment of the photograph’s production, I neither discovered nor conceived the landscape, as the image is contingent on “the two senses of invention.”<sup>11</sup> Derrida argues that “in the photograph, the referent is noticeably absent, suspendable, vanished into the unique past time of its event, but the reference to this referent . . . implies just as irreducibly the having-been of a unique and invariable referent.”<sup>12</sup> The mountain was there. The sun did come out and change the light to crimson. But my photograph fails to capture “the unique past time of its event,” for what it shows is a crimson mountain as if it has always unchangeably been there.

My intention was not to present a picture-perfect Ireland in a postcard but to respond to the world engaged in *its play*. Does my photograph succeed in portraying it? Absolutely not. It does not show nature but an object: a mountain. It does not establish a relationship to a co-inhabited space-time continuum. Shobeiri suggests that while “[p]ainters deduce meaning and visualise it as spatial continuum, [p]hotographers photograph spatial continuum and it becomes its meaning.”<sup>13</sup> But how can a photograph of a given natural scene mean “nature” if the viewer finds themselves in the position of mastery over the image? Would the image, depicting the world at play, not have to itself become a field of play? Would it not have to invite the spectator as a *reference* rather than furnish them with a deceitful *referent*? To understand how the signifying gesture

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<sup>9</sup> Kracauer, “Photography,” 37.

<sup>10</sup> Derrida, *Copy, Archive, Signature*, 43.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*, 44.

<sup>12</sup> Derrida, “Deaths of Roland Barthes,” 53.

<sup>13</sup> Shobeiri, *Place: Geophilosophy of Photography*, 44.

of the photograph may remain uncertain and suspendable, I needed to look deeper into the semantics of the photographic image.

### **Through the post-structuralist lens: the dissolution of presence**

As a photographer, I do not just inhabit the environment but actively interpret it during the production of the image and then later, again, at the post-production stage. I am also an editor, a curator and a spectator of my photographs, and as such, I need to be able to critically examine my own interpretive gaze. If I notice a discrepancy between my recollection of the phenomenal world and its representation in an image like *Captured by the Mountain*, I am prompted to analyse this incongruity further. In addition to using artistic research as a mode of inquiry that yields “empirical” visual data, I can also employ a theoretical toolkit allowing me to read the image in a more systematic way. What do I see when I look at *Captured by the Mountain*? And why do I perceive it in a certain way? To answer the question of how nature may or may not be photographed, I first must understand how the photograph becomes imbued with meaning.

It was Barthes who attempted to examine the semiotics of the photograph by applying to it a systemic structuralist reading and developing a comprehensive vocabulary of terms for image analysis. For him, the photograph has two sides. On the one hand, it transmits the literal reality of the scene, *denoting* it and doubling it as its “perfect analogon.”<sup>14</sup> Therefore, he calls the photographic image “a message without a code,”<sup>15</sup> which has a direct, physical relationship with its subject. On the other hand, the photograph is an object that has been constructed, treated, read, inscribed into a system of cultural codes, thus inevitably *connoting* certain aesthetic and ideological values of a society that receives it.<sup>16</sup> Barthes calls the event of “the connoted message [developing] on the basis of a message *without the code*”<sup>17</sup> the photographic paradox. What separates photography from other representational arts is precisely

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<sup>14</sup> Barthes, “The Photographic Message,” 17.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*, 19.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*



its claim to denotation, which “naturalises its symbols,”<sup>18</sup> making photography somewhat akin to speech.<sup>19</sup>

Inspired by structuralism’s ambition to explain culture in formalistic terms, Barthes develops his own method of rigorous visual analysis, proposing to study the photograph by unpacking three messages: linguistic, connotational and denotational. First, the photograph is always permeated with words surrounding it (caption, article, title, etc.), since our civilization is still one of the text and not of the image.<sup>20</sup> The linguistic message serves two functions: while an *anchorage* “[fixes] the floating chain of signifieds”<sup>21</sup> to one possible denoted meaning to focus the interpretation of the viewer, *relay* positions the text and the image in a complementary relationship, wherewith meaning emerges from their symbiosis (as in film dialogue, or aftermath photography, which will be discussed later).

The second message is the connoted one, which Barthes defines as the imposition of a coding on the photographic message proper, thus forming a “rhetoric . . . as a signifying aspect of ideology.”<sup>22</sup> It is through the procedures of connotation that a single photographic utterance, or *parole*, acquires its cultural meaning within the context of the *langue* of photography.<sup>23</sup> Below I attempt to “read” *Captured by the Mountain* (fig. 1) to illustrate some of the connoting procedures that might influence my perception of the image:

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<sup>18</sup> Barthes, “Rhetoric of the Image,” 51.

<sup>19</sup> Barthes’ distinction between denotation and connotation echoes Ferdinand De Saussure’s definition of the linguistic sign as a two-sided psychological entity, uniting a concept (the signified) and a sound-image (the signifier).

<sup>20</sup> Barthes suggests that in order to find an image not accompanied by words, one would need to go back to partially illiterate societies (“Rhetoric of the Image,” 38).

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*, 39.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.*, 49.

<sup>23</sup> This terminology, again, is borrowed from linguistics. De Saussure proposes to study language (*langue*) as a synchronic, homogeneous system, wherein one given utterance, language-use or *parole*, is seen as a diachronic, heterogeneous element. It is this very logic that allows the structuralist method to extend beyond the linguistic domain into the general field of culture. Structuralism, with its appeal to reason and promise to establish objective knowledge by moving from the particular to the general, offers a method for studying any *parole* (be it a literary work or a photograph) within the abstract structure that contains it (be it genre or philosophy).

- (1) Through the process of *photogenia*, which embraces the cultural implications of lighting and exposure, the photograph conjures up the environment of the wondrous and spectacular by accentuating the presence of the sun (absent from the frame), as natural light catches the top of the mountain enveloped in a thick cloud.
- (2) The material “texture” of the image, its composition and visual treatment, is defined by the procedure of *aestheticism*: the framing of *Captured by the Mountain* privileges the position of the mountain, whose surface, divided between light and shadow, is thus turned into a canvas upon which the spell of sunshine is portrayed. Also, the crimson tint of the image alludes to a romantic ideal of pastoral beauty so commonly featured in the landscape genre.
- (3) Finally, the *object* of the photograph also signifies ideas: the rocky mountain, seemingly devoid of any traces of cultivation and habitation, projects a sense of solitude and stillness, while its austere appearance is softened by the warm light.<sup>24</sup>

It can be concluded that the meaning of a landscape photograph in structuralist analysis emerges through the interpretation of a cultural image of the world imposed onto an existing geographical site. It is through such a reading that I identify *Captured by the Mountain* as a photograph presenting an idyllic vision of nature and inscribe it into the genre of landscape photography. Although structuralism provides the photographer and the spectator alike with a useful toolkit of interpretive terms and procedures, it also reveals that one is inclined to make a major assumption: namely, that the photograph contains a presence that can be examined. My reading of *Captured by the Mountain* presupposes that there is a mountain and nature to be read. This image, featuring a natural expanse, thus betrays its underlying politics, assuming the centrality of human culture that, in

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<sup>24</sup> Barthes also distinguishes *trick effects*, or a technical manipulation of reality that substitutes the heavily connoted, constructed message for the denoted one (such as photomontage); *pose* describing the actions of the human body within the image as culturally significant (such as “Kennedy praying”); and, lastly, *syntax* involving a discursive reading of a photograph when it figures as part of a series of several images, each imparting meaning upon one another (see “The Photographic Message,” 21-22).

this case, represents nature as peaceful, solitary and beautiful, but, ultimately, alienated from the viewing subject. The image does not arrest my gaze. Rather, my gaze arrests it. The view appears “idyllic” not because it actually is, but because I am able to deduce an idyllic meaning from it. Nature, here, is culturally conceived.

Barthes, however, was aware that an act of interpretation alone did not exhaustively explain the specificity of photography as a medium, since he recognised the photograph’s power to establish a phenomenal connection to the world. Before his post-structuralist turn, Barthes was already arrested by the mysterious agency of the photograph that he identified as its third, or denoted, message—the message without a code. However, precisely because it does not transmit any code, Barthes struggles to identify this “Edenic state of the image.”<sup>25</sup> He suggests that the denoted message can be distilled by stripping all the signs of connotation. Assuming that it is possible to do so, he further states that through denotation photography establishes a new space-time category—its *having-been-there*.<sup>26</sup> But what exactly does that mean? Indeed, *Captured by the Mountain* reflects the mountain that stood there, but as I suggested in the previous section, it fails to capture the mountain that I had experienced. Rather, it produces, through the procedures of connotation, a different kind of mountain and a different meaning. So, what does this photograph denote? What is its signified? What does it tell, except that I was at the site but was unable to capture it? The nature I had encountered eludes me in my photograph and what I see is its *no longer* having-been-there.

Barthes concludes “The Photographic Message” with a statement indicating his own doubt as to the nature of denotation:

Is this to say that a pure denotation, a *this-side of language*, is impossible? If such a denotation exists, it is perhaps not at the level of what ordinary language calls the insignificant, the neutral, the objective, but, on the contrary, at the level of absolutely traumatic

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<sup>25</sup> Barthes, “The Rhetoric of the Image,” 42.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*, 44.

images. The trauma is a suspension of language, the blocking of meaning.<sup>27</sup>

His allusion to trauma as a suspension of language is striking. The non-connoted reality that the photograph denotes seems to belong to a place of absence, where all signification comes to a halt. To signify a having-been-there-ness means to point at a non-presence that is “an absence of meaning full of all the meanings.”<sup>28</sup> To appear, therefore, is not to appear. At the time of writing his early essays on photography, Barthes arrives at a paradoxical conclusion that makes him confront the limitations of structuralism. His intellectual sense compels him to leave open the question of how “the photograph [can] be at once ‘objective’ and ‘invested,’ natural and cultural”<sup>29</sup> and admit that “it is through an understanding of the mode of imbrication of denoted and connoted messages that it may one day be possible to reply to that question.”<sup>30</sup> A few years later such a mode of imbrication begins to emerge in his own and Derrida’s post-structuralist work.

Before delving into Derrida’s critique of the metaphysics of presence and addressing the question of how meaning might appear only at the moment of its disappearance, I would like to summarise why I consider a photograph like *Captured by the Mountain* a failure of photographic reproduction. As a photographer, I inhabited the phenomenal world, which I experienced as a space-time continuum, when I was disturbed by a happening—the sun coming out of the clouds. The world was at play, and it touched me. I was not traumatised, but my perception, indeed, was pierced. But the resulting image does not pierce me. It shows the world at peace—an idyllic world as the analysis above suggests—while for me the world was ruptured. My photograph was supposed to denote change, the before and the after, not the mountain. My direct, indexical position was to the world at play, revealing the mutability of nature unfurling in time. The photograph, however, wrongly establishes a direct, indexical relationship to the mountain and

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<sup>27</sup> Barthes, “The Photographic Message,” 30.

<sup>28</sup> Barthes, “The Rhetoric of the Image,” 42.

<sup>29</sup> Barthes, “The Photographic Message,” 20.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

frames it as a presence that can be contained. Thus, the significance of the image does not coincide with the significance of the moment. Time passing through nature, with its light, movement, variance, that I intuitively aspired to denote, has been substituted for the connoted mountain. My experience, which was explosive and distinct, remained on the periphery of the image. Nature has been tamed. Heterogeneous time has been smoothed.

Habitually looking for a presence that could be pictured, I did not yet discern the intricate dance of presence and absence that takes place within the photographic frame, and I was unable to foresee that the image of an easily identifiable object would inevitably conceal the phenomenal world. But, perhaps, representation is simply always inferior to being? Maybe the fault was not at all my own? Maybe photography was to blame? These questions drew me deeper into semiotics, as I set out to understand what representation is, where it begins and where it ends. Is it a photograph of the mountain? The word “mountain” that I utter? Or the very thought of the mountain when I look at the phenomenal world?

To answer these questions, we need to look deeper into the history of metaphysics, which is synonymous with the history of defining being as presence.<sup>31</sup> For De Saussure, who examined the function of the sign through the lens of linguistics, speech always takes precedence over writing. Voice speaks of the self-presence of an idea, whereas the written sign misplaces it by making its seemingly inadequate copy. Thus, writing translates self-presence into a “mere” representation, functioning as a supplement and a substitution. It takes the place of that which was present in itself and fills it with void.<sup>32</sup> Within this logic, representations are seen as inferior to what they stand to represent, unless one proves their ability to denote reality. That is why the holy grail of photography is presence, the having-been-there-ness and a deciphered code of denotation.

Derrida, however, questions the hard divide between being (the signified) and representation (the signifier), proposing that no signified escapes the play of signifiers. For him, the signified is not a presence locked onto itself but is always already a trace, and, as such,

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<sup>31</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 97.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.*, 292.

it finds itself “*in the position of the signifier*.”<sup>33</sup> This brings about a profound change in both the methods of visual and textual analysis and our perception of reality. No medium or form of expression, be it speech or photography, can lay a better claim to the signified than any other. The deconstruction of the sign dismantles the very notion of presence, asking: What is presence if not its own erasure? Derrida shapes his philosophy under the influence of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology, which investigates one’s inner consciousness of time. For Husserl, the present is “already something that is not” or “something that is not yet.”<sup>34</sup> Present-beingness is always already split, although he does posit that presence can be obtained through the immediacy of unmediated perception.<sup>35</sup> Derrida, however, goes further and challenges the very premise that perception can be “unmediated.” For him, presence, defined as “the *form* that remains the same throughout the diversity of content,”<sup>36</sup> can never coincide with itself, because meaning is deferred, removed from us by a concatenation of traces. The search for the origin of the trace—understood as a momentary retention of experience, once experience splits the fabric of space and time<sup>37</sup>—is fated to fail, because each trace appears at the moment of its disappearance, as it is being effaced by other traces. Thus, the trace resists reaching any kind of fixed form, for it emerges not in its being but in its becoming and is incomplete.

Therefore, there is no photograph that can capture the *this-ness* of the scene. There is no view that can arise in front of the lens in its “givenness,” as it is always already “contaminated” by the act of signification. The very idea in the mind does not exist outside of signification, and, as such, it is a trace of its own becoming. For example, when I stand in the landscape and see before me the sea, the setting sun and an open field traversed by a network of famine

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<sup>33</sup> *Id.*, 73.

<sup>34</sup> Husserl, *Phenomenology Internal Time-Consciousness*, 51.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Lawlor, *Voice and Phenomenon*, xvi.

<sup>37</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 62.

walls,<sup>38</sup> I do not encounter it as “shaped” land, as an antithesis to the surrounding wilderness, but rather as the formation of the sign that one may call “landscape,” through the deferral of meaning.



Figure 2: *Trace-schaft* (M. Romanova-Hynes, 2016/2021)<sup>39</sup>

There is no original presence that the photographer may capture while walking in nature. In fact, what “nature” means depends on the context of the surrounding wilderness of thought—nature arises as a view, as a sunset, as a mountain covered in stone walls signifying their own history—nature is a montage, like any other image or word. It is a signifier, and if one were to take its photograph, it would emerge as a constellation of self-effacing reflections. Through this lens, *Landschaft* is a vanishing trace-*schaft*, which does not only disappear but also has not yet appeared.

My photograph *Trace-schaft* (fig. 2) is an attempt to demonstrate the work of traces, but it is undoubtedly an approximation and a simplification. A trace cannot be fixed. There cannot be a photograph of it. What Derrida calls the arche-trace, i.e. the very possibility of a trace,<sup>40</sup> is not an origin but rather the

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<sup>38</sup> The famine walls were built by the peasants during the Great Famine (1845–1852) in return for food, as many landowners would not feed them otherwise: the rocks and boulders were rolled up the hills to erect a massive network of enclosures, spanning much of the Irish west.

<sup>39</sup> The photograph was taken in 2016 and processed in 2021.

<sup>40</sup> Avtonomova, “Derrida and Grammatology,” 26.

underlying principle of differentiation that allows one to distinguish between differences and similarities and see their underlying simultaneity. Another name for this principle is *différance*, a neologism Derrida coins to describe the process of the formation of form itself.<sup>41</sup> What the trace captures is the dynamism of the sign, as each trace coincides not with itself in the future or in the past but with its neighbouring traces that are synchronously concurrent. This convergence is called “supplementarity,” and it describes how each instance of incompleteness seeks completion, or in other words, how absence of presentness aspires to acquire presentness but can never succeed.<sup>42</sup> As such, presence dissolves in the multitude of traces and cannot be centred, collected, or logocentric. For Derrida, presence is an emptiness, an abyss which engenders a play of all possible meanings within a given structure. The desire for presence emerges in the abyss of reflections, in the abyss of mirrors, in the abyss of representations of representations.<sup>43</sup>

Derrida concludes that “*the trace itself does not exist*,”<sup>44</sup> because to exist means to be present in itself. What stands in its place is writing. However, for him, writing is not synonymous with language, for it does not just refer to pictographic, ideographic and phonetic forms of record but to the whole continuity of phenomena that make it possible.<sup>45</sup> Writing precedes and encompasses any form of -graphy that captures not the sign of a thing but the sign of a sign.<sup>46</sup>

A landscape photograph aspires to capture the presence of a natural scene, but it can never transcend the limitations of its -graphy. A static image of a mountain (fig. 1) does not reveal its subject but conceals it. It condenses its essence into a thing that can

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<sup>41</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 63.

<sup>42</sup> According to Derrida, the dance of light and shadow establishes not a binary but a relationship along a differential border: “This is the very movement of the trace: a movement that is a priori photographic” (*Copy, Archive, Signature*, 17).

<sup>43</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 163.

<sup>44</sup> *Id.*, 167.

<sup>45</sup> Thus, language is only one species of writing, along with cinematography, choreography, music, painting, sculpture, photography, etc. *Id.*, 9.

<sup>46</sup> Derrida mentions that according to Chinese tradition, writing emerges from the contemplation of traces in nature, such as cuts and marks on a turtle’s shell (*Id.*, 123). The possibility of writing predates discerning patterns in nature like constellations in the night sky.



be named and captured, divulging not its “being” but that which functions as a signifier.<sup>47</sup> The image inscribes that which is unique into a system of relations and, as such, is an act of writing, the loss of self-presence, the loss of that which was never really given, which was “always already split, repeated, incapable of appearing to itself except in its own disappearance.”<sup>48</sup> A photograph like *Trace-schaft* does not hide its act of -graphy, compression and reduction but demonstrates its attempt at capturing the presence of a scene of nature as *rupture*. It is a violent act, for that which can be turned into a sign and written must first be compressed. But before the sign is a form, it is a play. Before one can picture a landscape, one must dissolve into the movement of the world, wherein human and nature emerge not as stable entities that can be contained in language or imagery but as shifting phenomena appearing in one’s mind in their inter-relation. Before the act of rupture takes place, before the image is shaped, being and representation themselves flow into each other, wherein an “I” is not yet separate from “the other.” In *Trace-schaft*, one is already detached from the environment, already on the outside, yet still perceiving the traces of the sign, which, once formed, will be called “landscape.”

Even though this photograph captures the multiplicity of nature’s appearances, it is also a static image, a presence in itself, a mere illustration. But nature cannot be represented as a presence, for it is not whole and internally coherent. Nature can be inhabited but not signified. Like the movement of *différance*, which is never in stasis, it must reflect the movement of time itself. The representation of nature, which I was seeking, must capture the movement of life-death<sup>49</sup> and thus reflect “the play of the world.”<sup>50</sup> Nature can only be “denoted” by gaining access to “an absence of meaning full of all the meanings.”<sup>51</sup> In order to appear, it must not

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<sup>47</sup> *Id.*, 125. The transition from speech to writing (in the narrow sense) happens within arche-writing itself. Thus, writing foregoes speech.

<sup>48</sup> *Id.*, 112.

<sup>49</sup> In 1975 and 1976, Derrida gave a series of lectures deconstructing the dichotomy between life and death titled “Life Death,” which was first published in English in 2020.

<sup>50</sup> Avtonomova, “Derrida and Grammatology,” 31 (my translation).

<sup>51</sup> Barthes, “Rhetoric of the Image,” 42.

be signified but entered through the movement of *différance* that itself does not move towards acquiring some quintessential presence but simply follows the logic of fateful chance, which is history. Rather than capturing presence, I would have to photograph absence.

### **Through the deconstructivist lens: presence, absence and aftermath photography**

One genre in particular situates the spectator in relation to what is not presented within the photographic frame. This genre, which bears the name of aftermath photography (or late photography), documents vacant places associated with past tragic events. Not limited to landscape images alone, it nonetheless often portrays natural scenes, showing, for example, the remains of concentration camps overgrown by forest, or still vistas of the blue sea covering shipwrecks. In short, late photography arrives late and captures traumatic absences. It refers to a time past and a time present and entangles the spectator within its temporal net. The mechanics of this process will be explained shortly, but for now I would like to clarify my interest in aftermath photography. Having learnt that the phenomenological appeal of the photograph happens at the level of the suspension of language, I started searching for an image that would set in motion the play of *différance* rather than furnish a stable meaning. For if I were to portray nature not as an object but as a field of agency, the photograph would have to deconstruct itself by removing the sense of separateness between the viewer and the image. The latter would have to obscure itself, call itself into question and invite the spectator to partake in an act of imaginative construction. I thus perceived the potential of aftermath photographs in light of Derrida's deconstructive method, which undoes binary oppositions (presence/absence, human/nature, subject/object) and explains their impossibility. But first I had to find out how a photograph might be perceived by a Derridean scholar.

Eduardo Cadava suggests that the photographic image is “a force of arrest,” which “spaces time and temporalizes space”<sup>52</sup>—like any type of writing. However, this does not mean that the photograph captures a discrete state, since it would not be possible

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<sup>52</sup> Cadava, *Words of Light*, 61.

to adjust one's shutter so that the camera would cleanly cut a moment from the stream of time. The image is by definition blurry. Cadava defines the photographed not as an atomic state but as a differential duration: "what eternally comes to pass—simultaneously what passes away and what survives this passing, that is, passing itself."<sup>53</sup> As such, the photograph is only an act of translation of an aspect of time into a unit of experience. Cadava echoes Derrida: "related to both the future and the past, the photograph constitutes the present by means of this relation to what it is not."<sup>54</sup> The "now" of a depicted event is never present, for it occupies heterogeneous time. Consequently, Derrida calls for a "break with the presumed phenomenological naturalism that would see in photographic technology the miracle of [giving] us a natural purity, time itself."<sup>55</sup> Rather, this technology gives us a trace of the so-called present that fails to arrive. For Derrida, Barthes' statement that "the denoted message in the photograph is absolutely analogical, which is to say continuous, outside of any recourse to a code"<sup>56</sup> would be erroneous, precisely because the photograph does not denote the signified. The "having-been-there" is in itself a signifier and, thus, cannot claim to capture its referent. It can only extend its signifying gesture to an absence, while remaining uncertain of its reference.

Electing a place based on "the historicity that is attached to it,"<sup>57</sup> the aftermath photograph gleams into a past time that cannot be shown and can never coincide with itself. It refers to the portrayed scene within a particular historical context and thus captures a duration—alluding to what had been within the illusory frame of the image's "now." Aftermath photographs deviate from traditional photojournalism by assuming a stance closer to forensic photography,<sup>58</sup> featuring no people, often aestheticizing the scenes they capture, and, most importantly, depending on captions for their interpretation.<sup>59</sup> It is through the text accompanying the image,

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<sup>53</sup> *Id.*, 39.

<sup>54</sup> *Id.*, 63.

<sup>55</sup> Derrida, *Copy, Archive, Signature*, 9.

<sup>56</sup> Barthes, "The Photographic Message," 20.

<sup>57</sup> Shobeiri, *Place*, 112.

<sup>58</sup> Company, "Safety in Numbness," 124.

<sup>59</sup> Shobeiri, *Place*, 112.

serving the function of relay, that the photograph communicates its pastness and invites the spectator to unravel the threads of concomitant temporalities. Moreover, as Shobeiri suggests, by employing the landscape genre, which “has a strong affinity with the temporal dimension of seeing,”<sup>60</sup> the aftermath image “elongate[s] the act of looking.”<sup>61</sup> Thus, the spectator is lured to see, but the reference of the image is obscure and points at a place of absence. On the one hand, it captures one’s gaze, while, on the other, it suspends one’s judgement. As a result, the aftermath photograph cannot serve as a sign signifying “a pre-existing reality,”<sup>62</sup> for it fails to denote its referent. Instead of capturing “reality,” it only extends an uncertain gesture to the world, serving as a reference. And it is, perhaps, through this gesture that the photograph may “[exceed] its function as a sign”<sup>63</sup> and offer the “phenomenological fascination”<sup>64</sup> that Tom Gunning recognises in it.

I would, therefore, suggest that the aftermath photograph defers meaning, because it portrays that which had already “vanished into the unique past time of its event,”<sup>65</sup> thus drawing the viewer into the movement of *différance*. And, as a photographer, I see the potential of the aftermath image to portray the agency of nature, because in it the landscape is not just addressed by the spectator, but it addresses them back. Within its frame, presence spills into absence, and absence pervades presence. Through this play of shadows, nature begins to emerge.

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<sup>60</sup> *Id.*, 123.

<sup>61</sup> *Id.*, 113.

<sup>62</sup> Gunning, “What’s the Point of an Index?,” 45.

<sup>63</sup> *Id.*, 48.

<sup>64</sup> *Id.*, 45.

<sup>65</sup> Derrida, “Deaths of Roland Barthes,” 53.



Figure 3: *The Doo Lough Tragedy, 1849* (M. Romanova-Hynes, 2016/2021)

The west of Ireland is not just a beautiful part of the country; it is also a place associated with one of Ireland's major cultural traumas—namely, the Great Famine of 1845–1852.<sup>66</sup> During my time in the west of Ireland, I lived close to the lake Doo Lough and its surrounding mountains, a site that has come to symbolise Ireland's tragic colonial history. I took the photograph *The Doo Lough Tragedy, 1849* because the locale fascinated me: upon looking at the lake, all I could see was the event that never ceased to take place in its non-presence. The photograph itself seemingly captures a spectacular landscape, but, through its caption, it further imparts a historical meaning that collides the past with the present, impregnated with the traces of remembered time. This is the story it refers to: In late March of 1849, Colonel Hogrove and Captain Primrose ordered the peasants, claiming relief, to follow them to a

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<sup>66</sup> The Great Famine was caused by the failure of potato crops for several consecutive years due to a potato blight. It particularly affected areas in the west and south of Ireland, where the Irish language was dominant. It is estimated that between 1 and 1.5 million people died from disease and starvation, with a further 2 million people emigrating. Overall, the country's population was reduced by about 25%. Notably, during the Famine, Ireland continued to produce food for export to Great Britain.

hunting lodge situated on Doo Lough instead of meeting at the originally assigned village of Louisburgh. But when several hundred destitute people arrived, they were sent back empty-handed. On their journey, approximately 20 kilometres each way in harsh weather, many died from exhaustion and starvation. Some of the bodies were found on the road with grass in their mouths.<sup>67</sup>

Unlike *Captured by the Mountain, The Doo Lough Tragedy, 1849* was not a sudden response to my immediate environment but the result of a prolonged reflection. It was conjured up from the imagination, as I perceived this scene as a faint echo of the past, a metaphor and a trace. What I realised while editing the photograph was that the image itself helped me to inhabit the landscape, as if it captured me within its frame. The longer I looked at it, the more I imagined myself in the position of someone standing there, hungry and in rugged clothes, on the verge of death. This image, accompanied by its caption, set up a stage upon which a play of my own imagination was beginning to take place. To see, in the case of aftermath photography, was not to see but to envisage. The theatricality of the image resulted from an encounter between the viewing subject and the spectral scene, whose referent is withheld and only alluded to by name.

The Great Famine left no photographic record, even though photographic technology was available at the time.<sup>68</sup> There is no single surviving image, no “original” capturing the sight of the starving population, that may serve as a point of pictorial reference. So, when I look at *The Doo Lough Tragedy, 1849*, I only know that death was there. But let us imagine that the bodies of the hungry people were portrayed in place of absence. How would this change the perception of the scene? Would the photograph depict *them*? Would their lives be what it signified? No. I realised that I was naive to ever believe that the photograph could capture someone’s (or something’s) presence, for the starved people themselves would be

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<sup>67</sup> A local fisherman told me a more metaphorical story. During the Famine, some people living in this area walked into the lake out of desperation. To drown in the icy-cold water was more desirable for them than to continue living. Now there stands a stone cross, overlooking Doo Lough, that commemorates the victims of famines all around the world.

<sup>68</sup> O’Toole, “What would photos of the Great Famine have been like?”

signifiers. The photograph would capture not their being but their metaphorical (and in some cases, literal) death. The image would be their epitaph. The photograph would herald their disappearance, for every appearance within the photographic frame—be it a mountain or a person—is written by the image to be sacrificed to its discourse. All they would mean within the context of the photograph would be “hunger.” They would be turned into an icon of starvation, inscribed into an episteme. So, what presence can a photograph signify, if not the erasure of presence?<sup>69</sup> What truth can it denote if not writing, which is *différance*? The photograph obliterates its subjects by “condensing and immobilising what it seeks to represent”<sup>70</sup> and creates a differentiated moment, which is already a trace.

The aftermath genre recognises that photography stands in a negative differential relationship to what it photographs, for it can never reproduce the non-reproducible presence of phenomena but only seize their likeness. The aftermath photograph allows the photographer and the spectator alike to engage with photography as a relational medium. When I look at a scene of absence, serving as an uncertain reference to that which cannot be portrayed, I am invited to mentally reconstruct a vanished time. My body is drawn into the experience of the photograph, as the image becomes, in Elena del Río’s words, “translated into a bodily response . . . body and image no longer function as discrete units, but as surfaces in contact, engaged in a constant activity of reciprocal re-alignment and inflection.”<sup>71</sup> No longer on the outside of the photograph, I actively construct the scene, which could have never been mimetically presented in the first place.

The failure of mimetic reproduction prompts Cadava to suggest that “the photograph most faithful to the event of the photograph [would be] the least faithful one, the least mimetic one.”<sup>72</sup> A faithful historical photograph would signal its *not*-having-been-there. It would conjure up nothing but a “ghostly emergence,”<sup>73</sup> for it would recognise that the otherness of the past simply cannot

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<sup>69</sup> Cadava, *Words of Light*, 109.

<sup>70</sup> *Id.*, 92.

<sup>71</sup> Del Río, “Foundation of the Screen,” 101.

<sup>72</sup> Cadava, *Words of Light*, 15.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

be experienced in the form of a presence.<sup>74</sup> It would reveal itself as a trace, as the absence-presentness of meaning, which emerges not out of itself but out of the play of *différance*. This photograph could never be *known*, but it could be *experienced*. It would not point at an origin but only the past-futureness of self-effacing time. As such, it would give agency to its subjects rather than turn them into the objects of spectatorship.

The fidelity act of an aftermath photograph, such as *The Doo Lough Tragedy, 1849*, is thus to “[withhold] a sense of knowing”<sup>75</sup> and to fashion a perspective instead. Rather than “denoting” the “presence” of the victims, the photograph connotes it. Having adopted the viewpoint of the people who were “there” and who suffered, I view the landscape *with* them. As a result, the enfolding nature within the scene acquires its own agency as “the world in which *we* stand.”<sup>76</sup> Nature, here, is sensually conceived. Through this photograph, I start imagining the world they would have seen. Inhabiting the surrounding environment, I ask myself: “They stood in front of this view, this mountain, this water. Where could they have escaped?” The mountain is too high to climb, too bare to nourish. It frames the scene on all sides, capturing me within nature that is inescapable. Nature rises as a force that underlies people’s very existence, containing them, pre-empting them and showing their ultimate dependency on its resources. The site of the Doo Lough tragedy has outlived the tragedy and its victims. As a photographer and a spectator, I come to mourn, surrendering myself to death. Thus, I would argue, the aftermath photograph gives rise to what Barthes terms as *punctum*, a phenomenological state of arrest and intensity, enabling me to transform into an active witness of time itself<sup>77</sup> and putting me in relation to the event referenced within the image, which mediates not between the signifier and the signified but transitory temporalities.

When one sees the bare ground where people died of starvation, one experiences a vague recollection of death, pointing

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<sup>74</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 70.

<sup>75</sup> Brett, *Photography and Place*, 6.

<sup>76</sup> Quoted in Shobeiri, *Place*, 23 (my italics).

<sup>77</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 119.



back at one's own position.<sup>78</sup> Thus, the viewer unknowingly partakes in the play of *différance*, being written by the photograph, invented by a multitude of voices, and then erased again. The self-effacing work of traces within the photographic image thus furnishes a mode of witnessing, wherein neither nature nor people are seen as objects, pictured within the photographic frame, but interrelated agencies. Having said that, it should be noted that the landscape here is "staged" in so far as it is dependent on the interplay between the caption and the image. While the photograph's reference is uncertain, its signifying gesture relies on the spectator's familiarity with the context of the event—the Great Famine, identified by a date, 1849, and the word "tragedy." Thus, for the phenomenal play of absence to take place, the presence of the text must first invoke the phantoms of history.

The absence within the image defers meaning. As an image "bound with an uncertainty and anxiety," it does not intend "to fix the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs."<sup>79</sup> In it, nature is felt in its still potency and human suffering is felt in its resounding silence. The image does not hide the play of writing behind the mask of a denoted "there," which would trick the viewer into proclaiming their knowledge of where "there" is. Rather, it is a photograph faithful to its own infidelity, for it reveals the lacuna present at the centre of every photograph: its absent referent.

## **Conclusion**

My quest to take a photograph of nature led me to address the question of what nature is to me. As it turned out, nature is not just the mountains, the ocean and the fields, but the whole complex of living phenomena—a world at play—unfolding in aeonial time and involving me with it. Nature cannot be framed in a static shot; it cannot be denoted as a whole and internally coherent self-contained presence. It cannot be signified, reduced to an object of spectatorship. If a photograph of nature is to possess the slightest measure of what Proust called "the dignity which it ordinarily lacks,"

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<sup>78</sup> Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 68.

<sup>79</sup> Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," 39.

it must affect the spectator and further engage them as a participant in an act of imaginative creation.

Therefore, the photograph portraying a phenomenal world at play must itself become a field of play. An image of nature must conceal more than it can ever reveal, for if it were to put the viewer in the position of knowledge and mastery over its referent, it would no longer suggest the relationality between the observer and the observed. To retain its agency, nature must appear in the mind of the viewer not as a fixed sign but as a trace, evading capture and easy categorisation. Moreover, it must be felt, for in order for meaning to have any significance at all, it must be sensed before it can be known.<sup>80</sup>

In this article, I have tried to outline how my experience with aftermath photography, which focuses on absence rather than presence, taught me to engage the subjectivity of the spectator and explore the phenomenological potential of photography. I realised that what I value in this medium is not its denotational claims but, on the contrary, its spectrality, revealing nothing but a “ghostly emergence.”<sup>81</sup> It is the phantoms that hold sway, and for nature to have agency in a photographic representation, it, too, must become a phantom, emerging out of the play of *différance*. My task as a photographer, therefore, is not to collect likenesses but to set up a stage upon which objects, people and places can acquire their spectral agency, so that, in Derrida’s words, “[one] could speak of these photographs as of a thinking, as a pensiveness without a voice, whose only voice remains suspended.”<sup>82</sup> The photograph is a performance. The camera, thus, should not mirror its referents, for it cannot. Rather, it should put the spectator in relation to their own limited time.

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<sup>80</sup> Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*.

<sup>81</sup> Cadava, *Words of Light*, 15.

<sup>82</sup> Quoted in Derrida, *Copy, Archive, Signature*, ix.

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