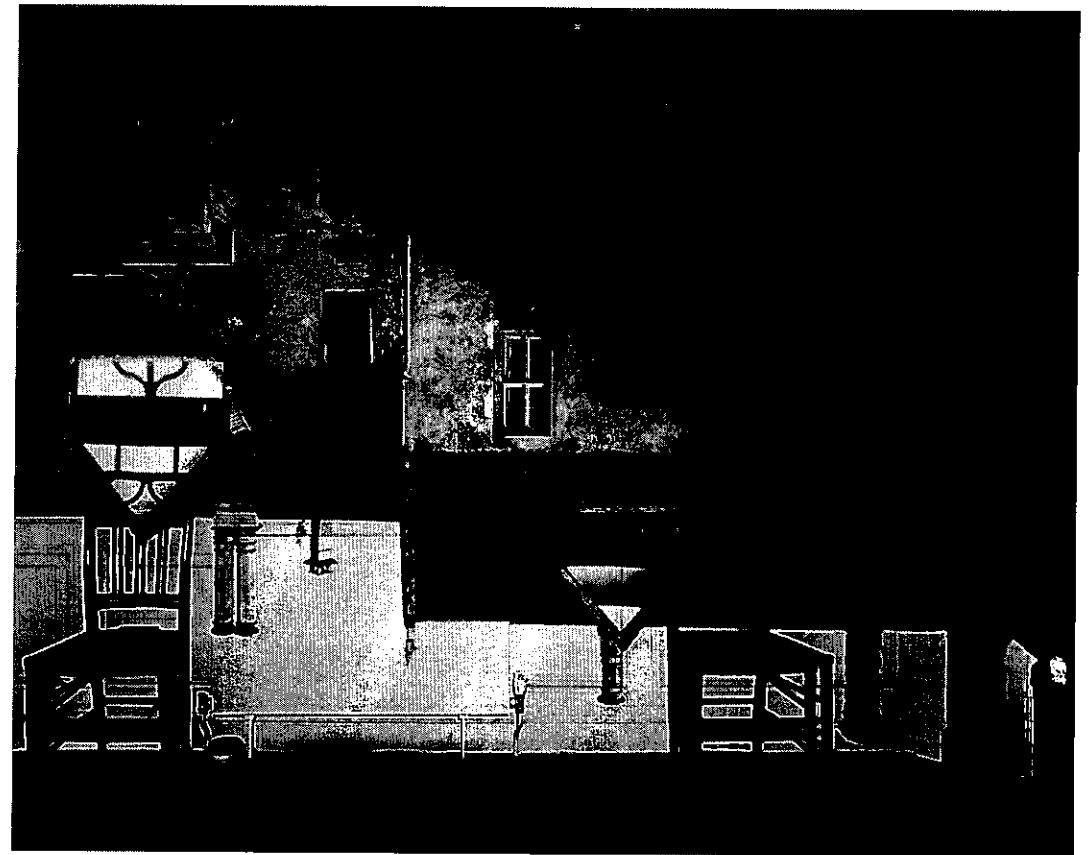


THE MIRACLE OF ANALOGY

or

The History of Photography, Part 1

KAJA SILVERMAN



STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS STANFORD CALIFORNIA

Chapter 5
JE VOUS

IN THE FINAL DECADES of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, the tropes that had earlier been associated with the pinhole camera, the camera obscura, and chemical photography began appearing in some surprising places: in painting, literature, and psychoanalysis. When Cézanne described himself as a “recording machine,”¹ and Rilke wrote that *The Sonnets to Orpheus* had been “dictated” to him by a non-human agency,² they echoed what Pope said about the camera obscura and Talbot about the calotype: “It is not the artist who makes the picture, but [rather] the picture which makes ITSELF.”³ They also indicated that they themselves were receivers.

Cézanne and Rilke sought to receive what the world gave them on the “surface” of their psyches, which they conceptualized as a photographic plate. The painter “must silence all the voices of prejudice within him, he must forget, forget, be quiet, become a perfect echo,” Cézanne told Joachim Gasquet. “And then the entire landscape will engrave itself on the sensitive plate of his being.”⁵ “Paris this time was just as I had promised it to myself, difficult,” Rilke wrote Lou Andreas-Salomé in 1913, “and I seem to myself like a photographic plate which is exposed too long, in that I still lie open to what is here, this powerful influence.”⁴ They attempted to transmit what they received to others through their work, just as Leonardo did in the fifteenth century. Unfortunately, though, Cézanne and Rilke weren’t always able to accept what was given to them, because something within them wanted the exact opposite: isolation and autonomy.

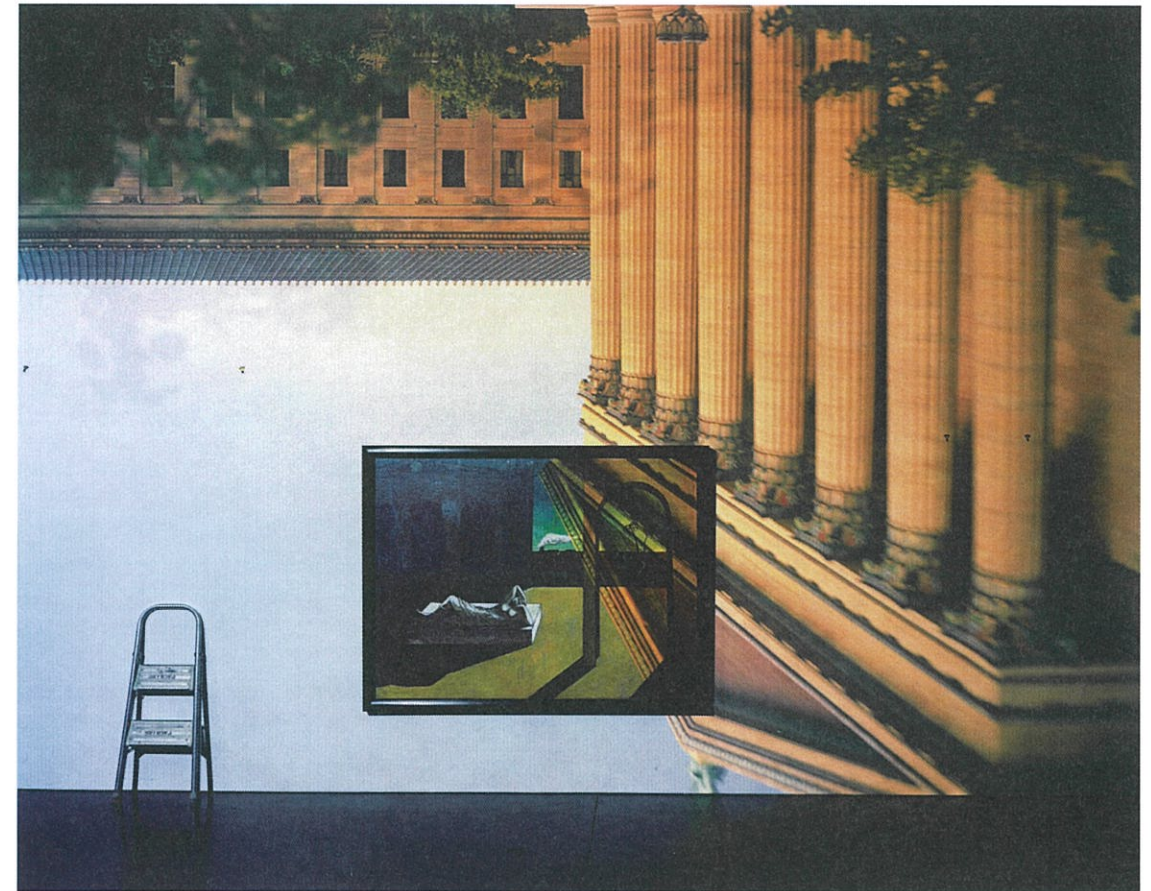
Freud also compares the psyche to a photographic plate on which light inscribes images, describes the human subject as the receiver of these images, and talks about an opposing force: one that seeks to exclude the world and replace it with a mental representation. Conscious vision begins with the influx of perceptual stimuli from the external world into the psyche, he writes in *Interpretation of Dreams*. These stimuli are “receive[d]” at the “sensory end” of the psyche, and pass into the unconscious, where—as in the darkened chamber of a photographic camera—they inscribe enduring images. Most perceptual

stimuli move from there to the preconscious, and then on to the perception-consciousness “system.” Since this system is incapable of retaining anything, they quickly disappear, making room for new perceptions.⁶

In *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, Freud compares the enduring images that light inscribes on the unconscious to a photographic negative, the unconscious to a room in which negatives are stored, and the images that reach consciousness to a positive print. “Every mental process . . . exists to begin with in an unconscious stage or phase and that it is only from there that the process passes over into the conscious phase,” he observes, “just as a photographic picture begins as a negative and only becomes a picture after being turned into a positive.” Not every negative “becomes a positive,” though, “nor is it necessary that every unconscious mental process should turn into a conscious one.”⁷ It is also not *possible* for every unconscious mental process to become conscious. Perceptions arrive at consciousness in a “cut-up” form, Freud writes, since only one image can enter at a time.⁸ And some never arrive; they are confined to the unconscious because they are associated with forbidden wishes.⁹

In a 1924 essay, Freud compares human perception to another implicitly photographic device—one that recalls the pencil of nature, and the kind of “openness” to which Rilke and Cézanne aspired. This device is the “Mystic Writing-Pad,” a children’s notebook with an erasable top layer and an underlying waxy support that retains the traces of what is inscribed with a stylus on the top layer. The unconscious resembles the underlying layer, Freud observes, because its capacity to receive is limited by what has already been inscribed on it. The perception-consciousness system is like the top layer, which retains nothing, but has “an unlimited receptive capacity for new impressions.”¹⁰ A psychic agency with an “unlimited capacity for new impressions” is one into which “fresh ‘vital differences’”¹¹ are constantly flowing—i.e., one similar to the camera obscura and early photography. And although Freud usually privileges the unconscious over the perception-consciousness system, here his sympathies are clearly with the latter.

Elsewhere, though, he associates the psyche with a different kind of photography: the kind that emerged through the industrialization of the medium. Sometimes an image becomes stuck in the “defile” of consciousness, he writes in *Studies in Hysteria*, which prevents new perceptions from entering. It “remains in front of the [subject],” so that he “sees nothing of what is pushing after it, and forgets what has already pushed its way through.”¹² Human desire also resembles a printing press, Freud remarks in “The Dynamics of Transference”; it is continually reproducing the same image. “Each individual . . . has acquired a specific method of his own in his conduct of his erotic life—that is, in the preconditions to falling in love that he lays down, in the instincts he satisfies



Colorplate 1/Figure 20. Abelardo Morell, *Camera Obscura: The Philadelphia Museum of Art East Entrance in Gallery #171 with a de Chirico Painting*, 2005. Inkjet print. Image © Abelardo Morell, courtesy of Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York.



Colorplate 2/Figure 21. Abelardo Morell, *Camera Obscura: View of Central Park Looking North—Fall*, 2008. Inkjet print. Image © Abelardo Morell, courtesy of Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York.



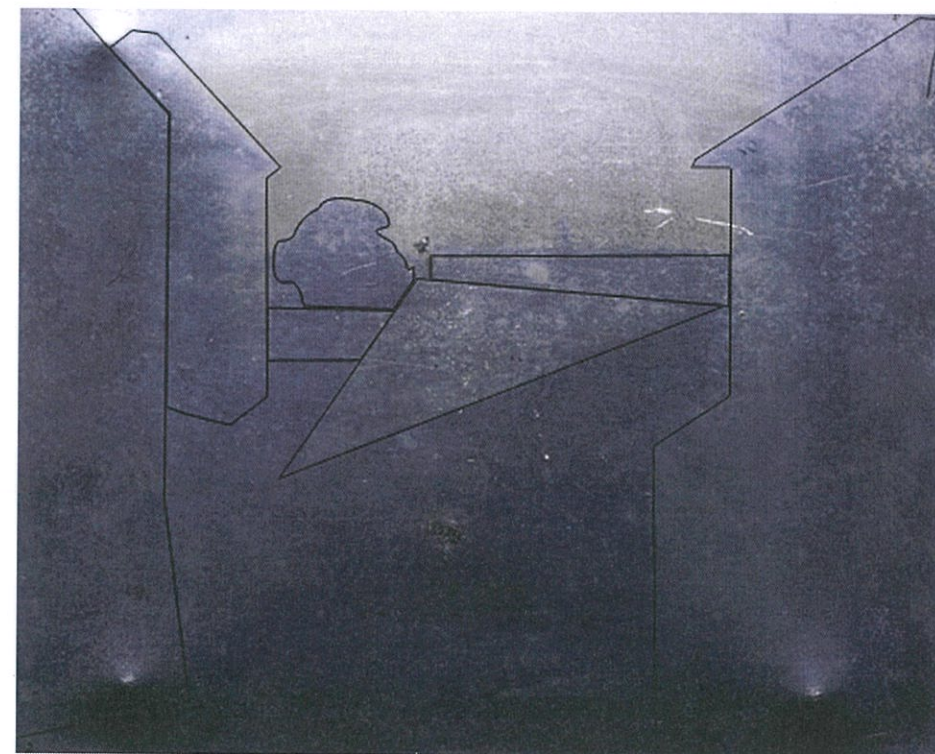
Colorplate 3/Figure 28. Henry Fox Talbot, *The Stable Court, Lacock Abbey*, ca. 1841. Calotype negative. Courtesy of the National Media Museum/SSPL.



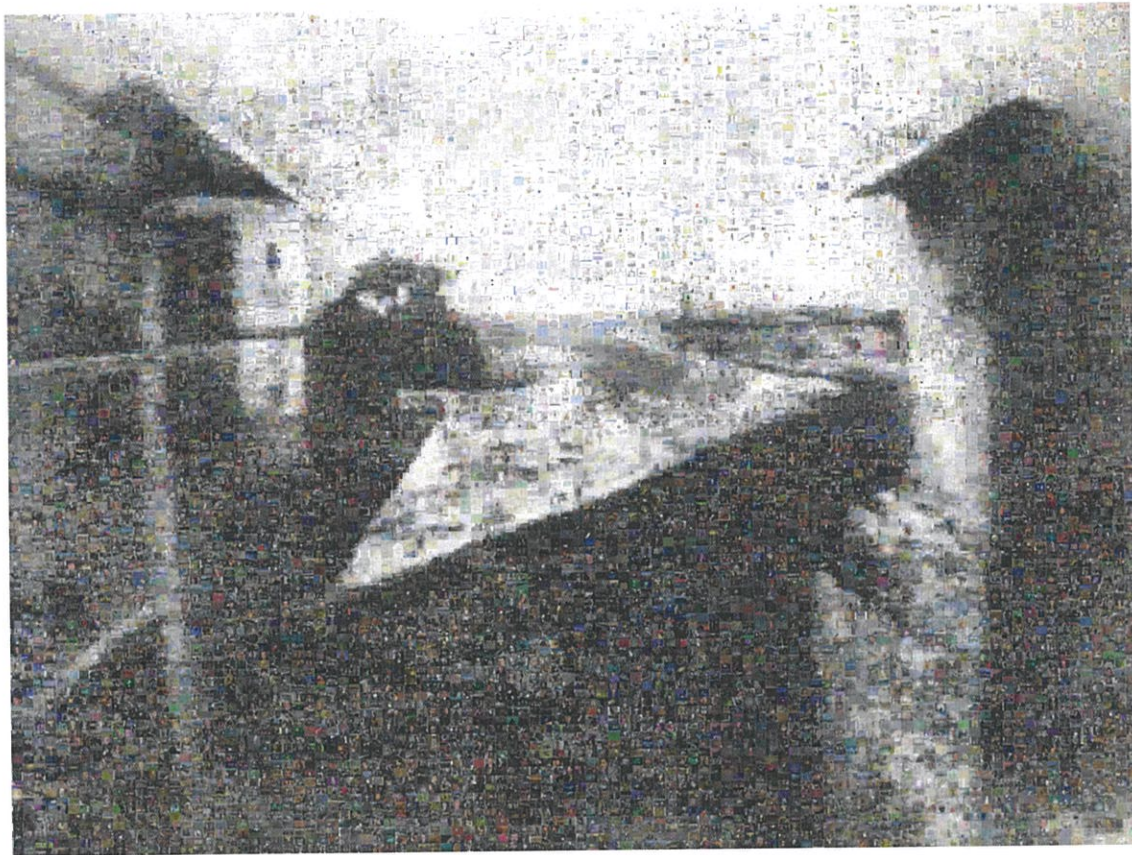
Colorplate 4/Figure 29. Henry Fox Talbot, *Entrance Gate, Abbotsford*, 1845. Calotype negative. Courtesy of the National Media Museum/SSPL.



Colorplate 5/Figure 33. *View from the Window at Le Gras* in its original frame. Courtesy of the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin.



Colorplate 5/Figure 35. *View from the Window at Le Gras* with Gernsheim's pencil drawing superimposed. Courtesy of the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin.



Colorplate 6/Figure 36. Juan Fontcuberta, *Googlegram: Niépce*, 2005. Chromogenic print. Courtesy of the artist.



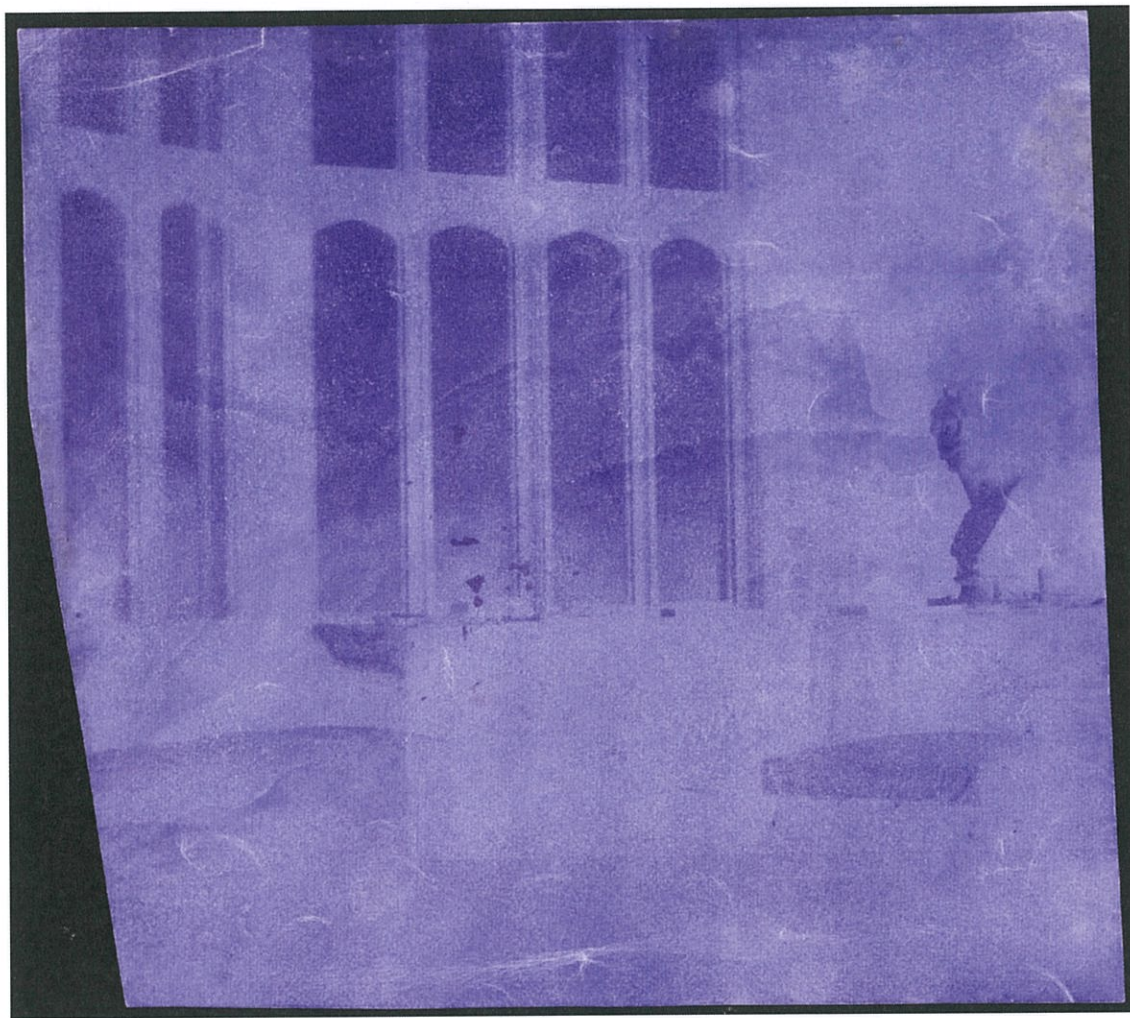
Colorplate 7/Figures 37 & 38. Juan Fontcuberta, *Googlegram: Niépce* (details). Courtesy of the artist.



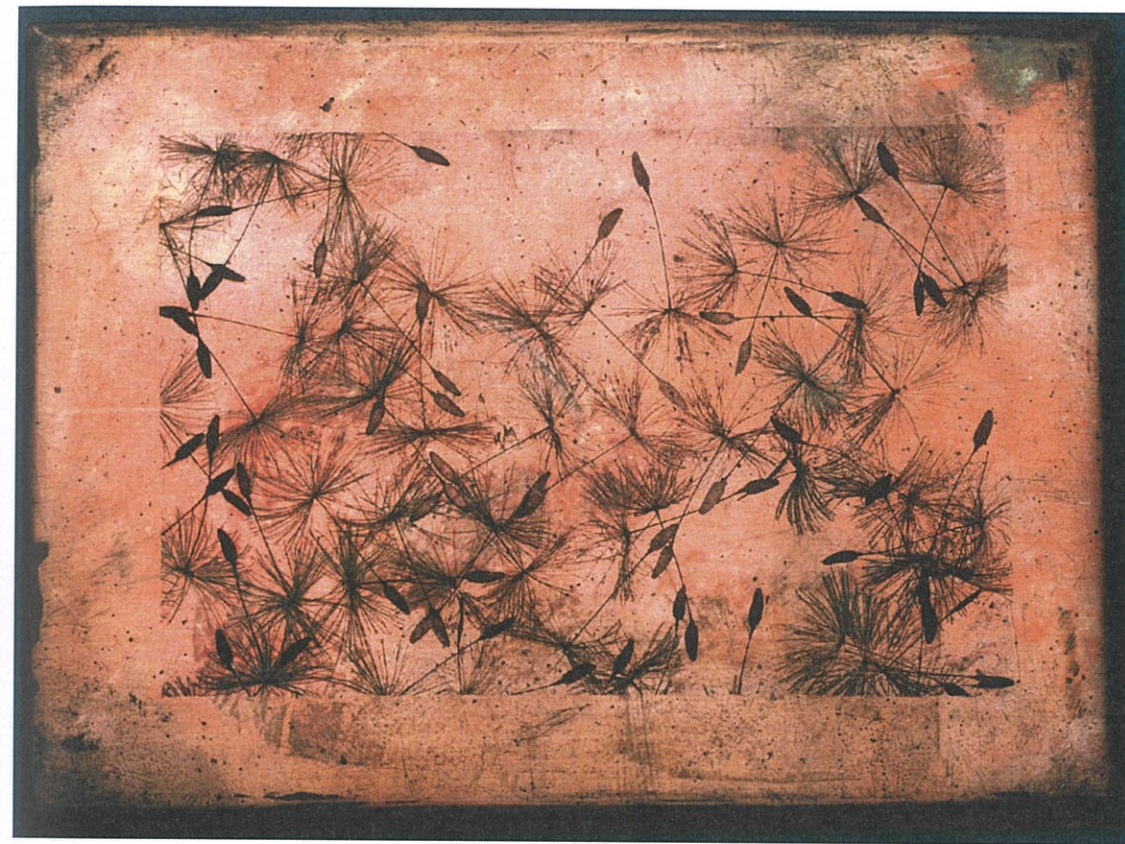
Colorplate 8/Figure 39. Jeff Wall, *Milk*, 1984. Transparency in light box. Courtesy of the artist.



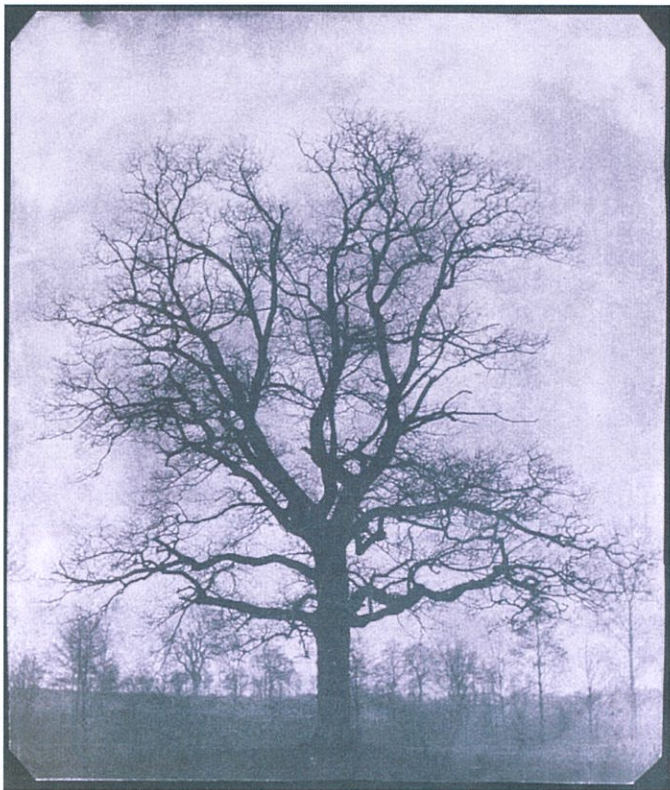
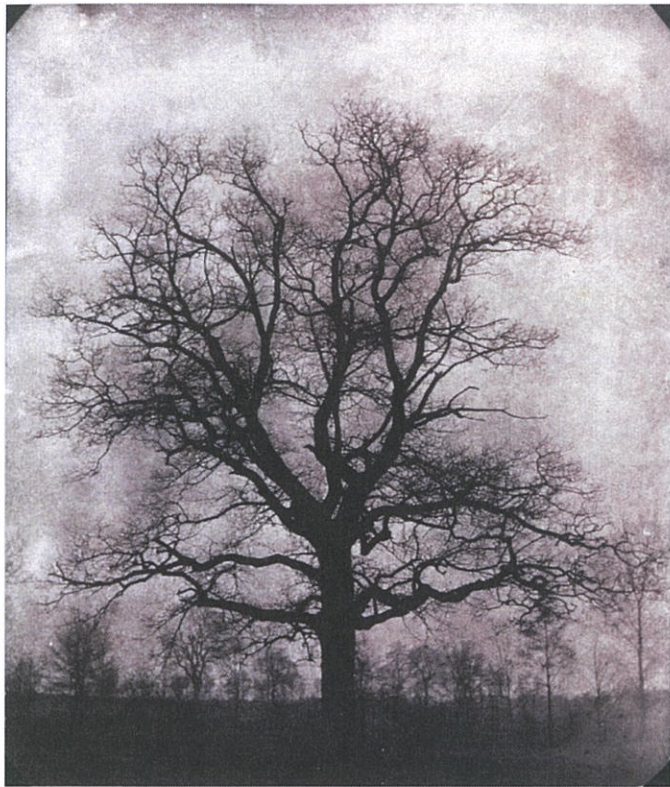
Colorplate 9/Figures 54 & 55. Andrei Tarkovsky, *Solaris*, 1972 (film still).



Colorplate 10/Figure 60. Henry Fox Talbot, *Oriel Window, South Gallery, Lacock Abbey*, April 1839. Photogenic drawing negative. Courtesy of the National Media Museum/SSPL.



Colorplate 11/Figure 61. Henry Fox Talbot, *Seeds*, 1853. Photogravure. Courtesy of the National Media Museum/SSPL.



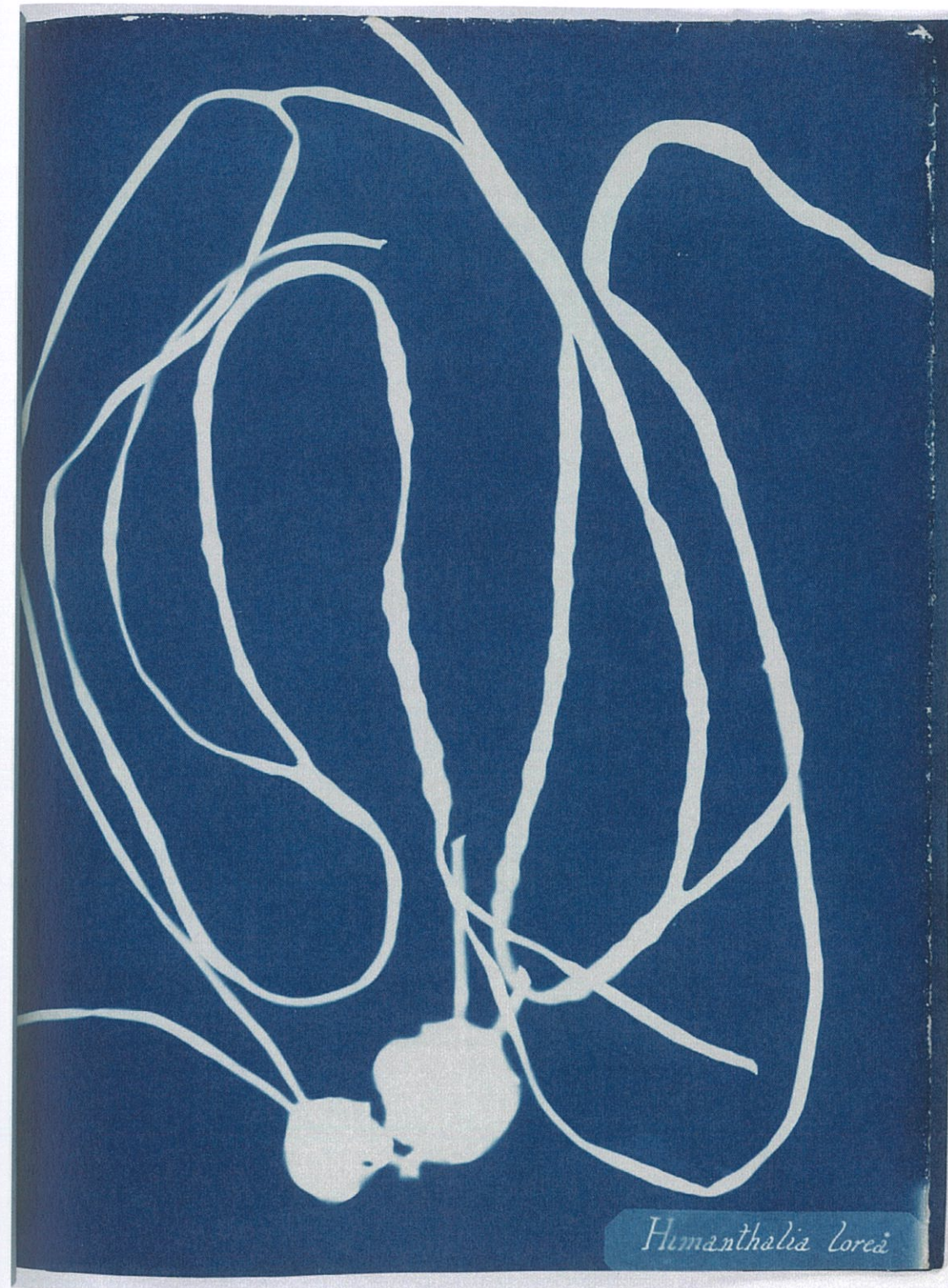
Colorplate 12/Figures 62 & 63. Henry Fox Talbot, *Tree in Winter*, ca. 1842. Salted paper print from calotype negative. Courtesy of the National Media Museum/SSPL.



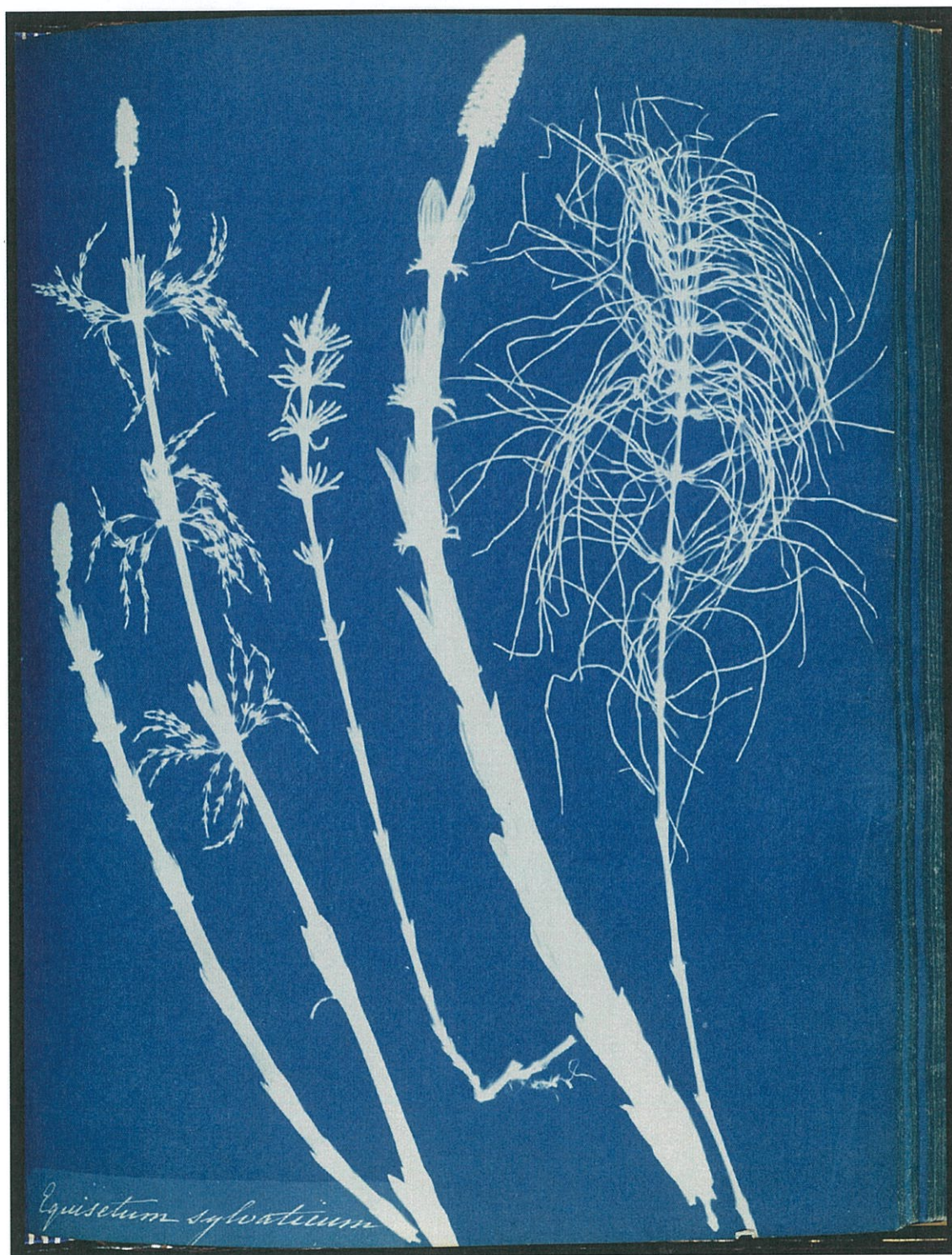
Colorplate 13/Figure 64. Henry Fox Talbot, *China Bridge at Lacock Abbey*, 1841. Salted paper print. Courtesy of the National Media Museum/SSPL.



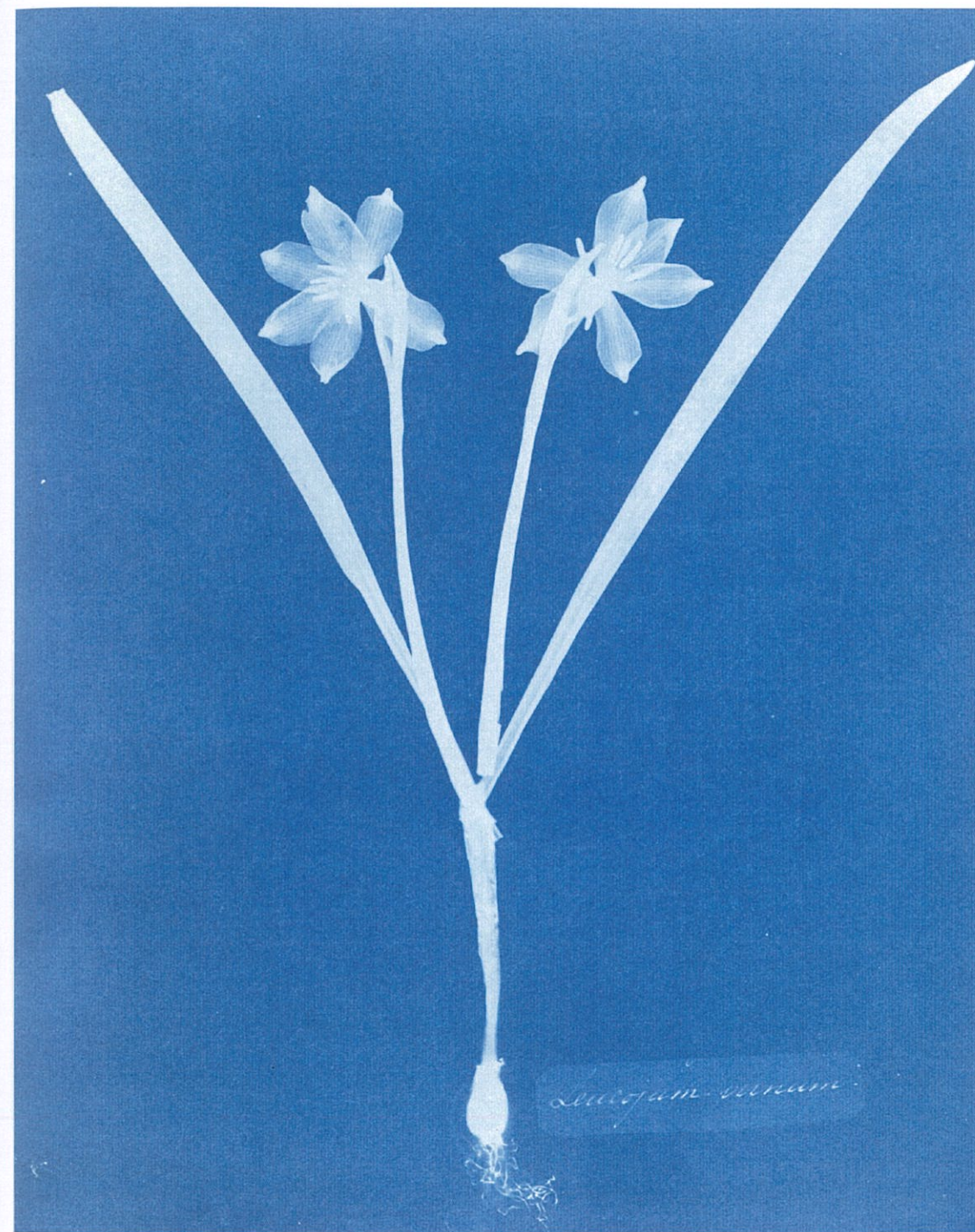
Colorplate 14/Figure 65. Anna Atkins, *Cystoseira granulata*, from *Photographs of British Algae*, 1843. Cyanotype. Courtesy of the National Media Museum/SSPL.



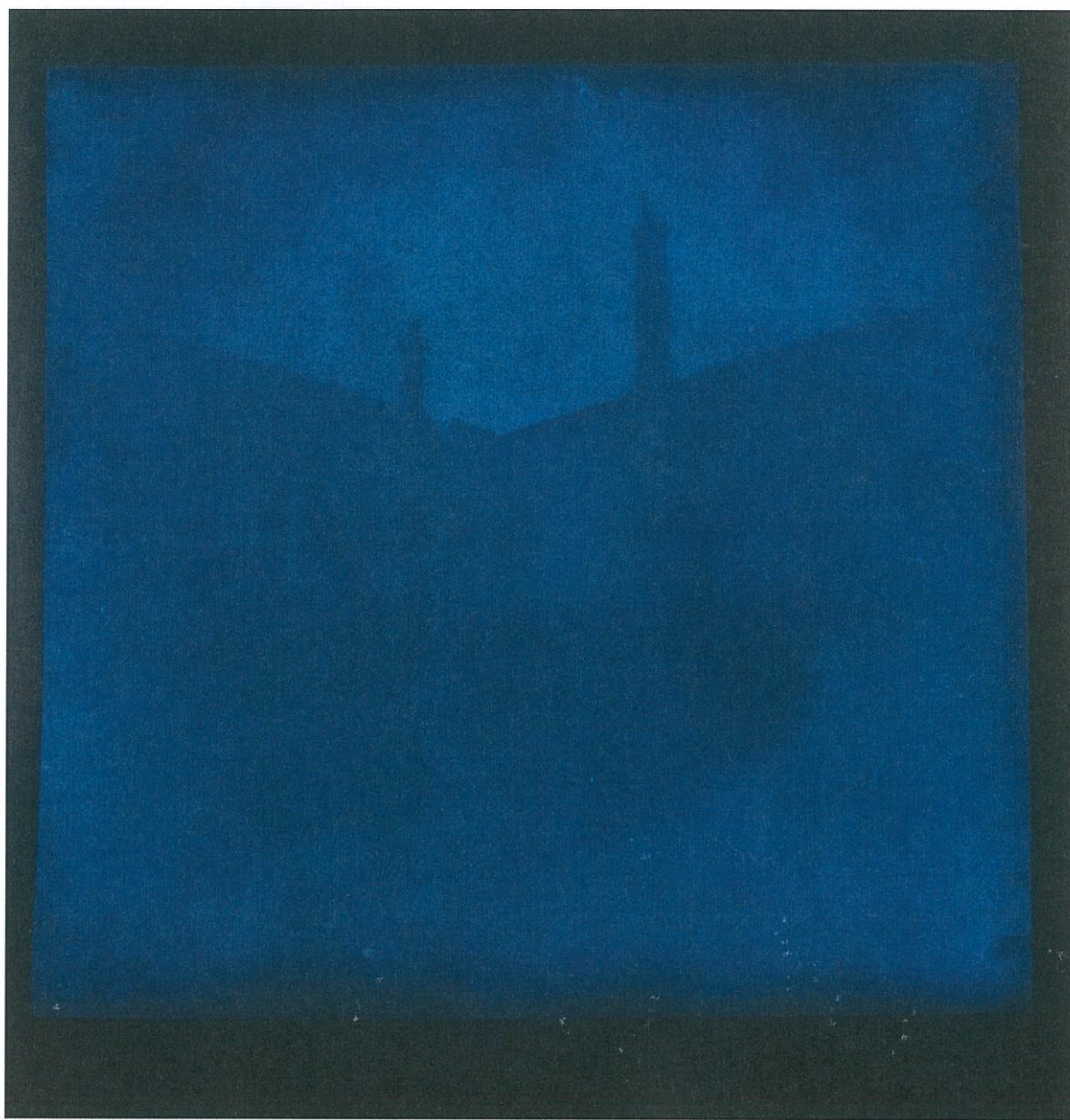
Colorplate 15/Figure 66. Anna Atkins, *Himanthalia lorea*, from *Photographs of British Algae*, 1843. Cyanotype. Courtesy of the National Media Museum/SSPL.



Colorplate 16/Figure 67. Anna Atkins, *Equisetum sylvaticum*, from *Cyanotypes of British and Foreign Ferns*, 1853. Cyanotype. Courtesy of the Open Content Program of the Getty Museum, Los Angeles.



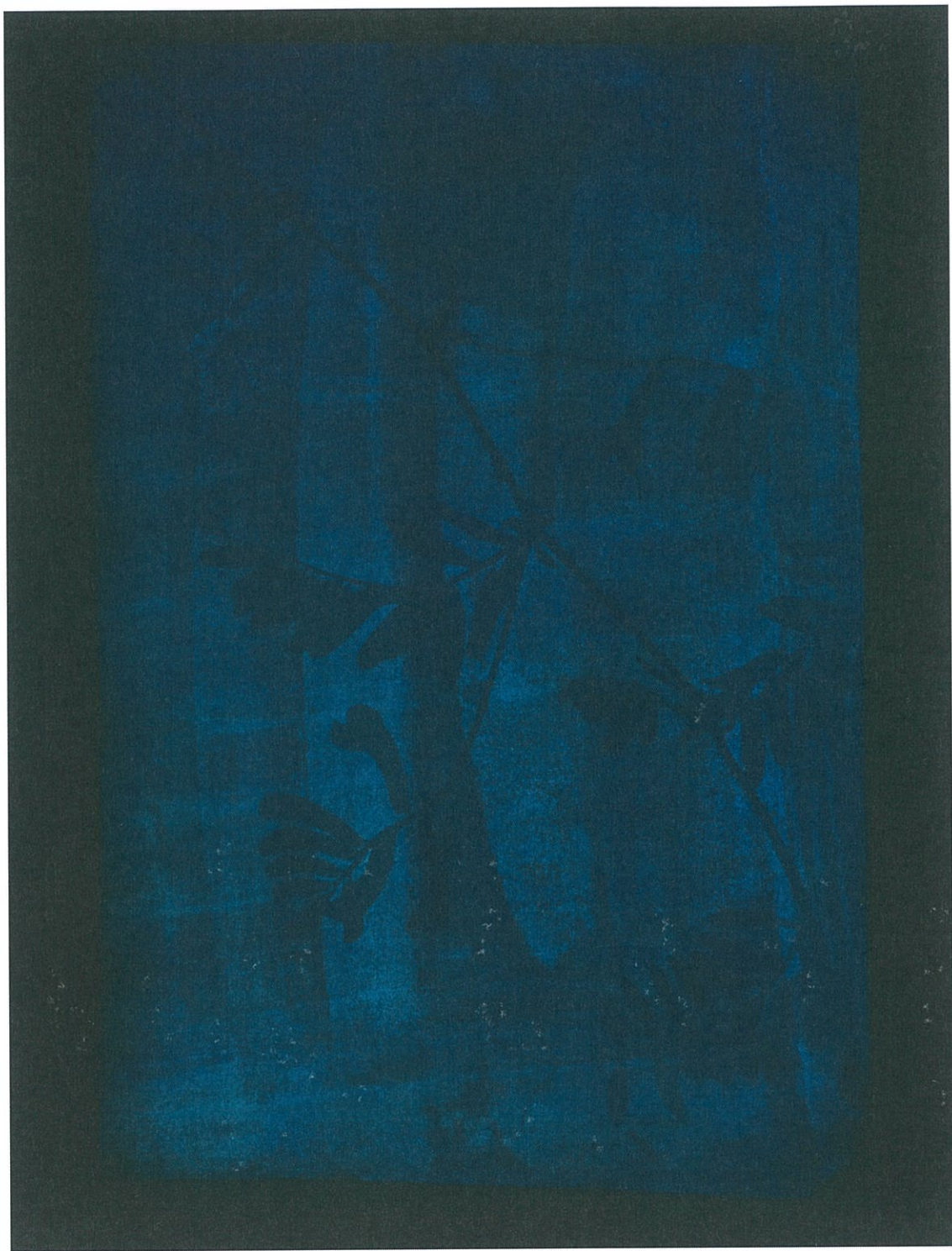
Colorplate 17/Figure 68. Anna Atkins, *Leucojum varium*, from *Cyanotypes of British and Foreign Ferns*, 1853. Cyanotype. Courtesy of the Open Content Program of the Getty Museum, Los Angeles.



Colorplate 18/Figure 69. Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Roofline of Lacock Abbey, Most Likely 1835–1839*, 2009. Toned silver-gelatin print from calotype negative. © Hiroshi Sugimoto, courtesy Pace Gallery.



Colorplate 19/Figure 70. Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Louisa Gallwey and Horatia Feilding, at Lacock Abbey, August 29, 1842*, 2009. Toned silver-gelatin print from calotype negative. © Hiroshi Sugimoto, courtesy Pace Gallery.



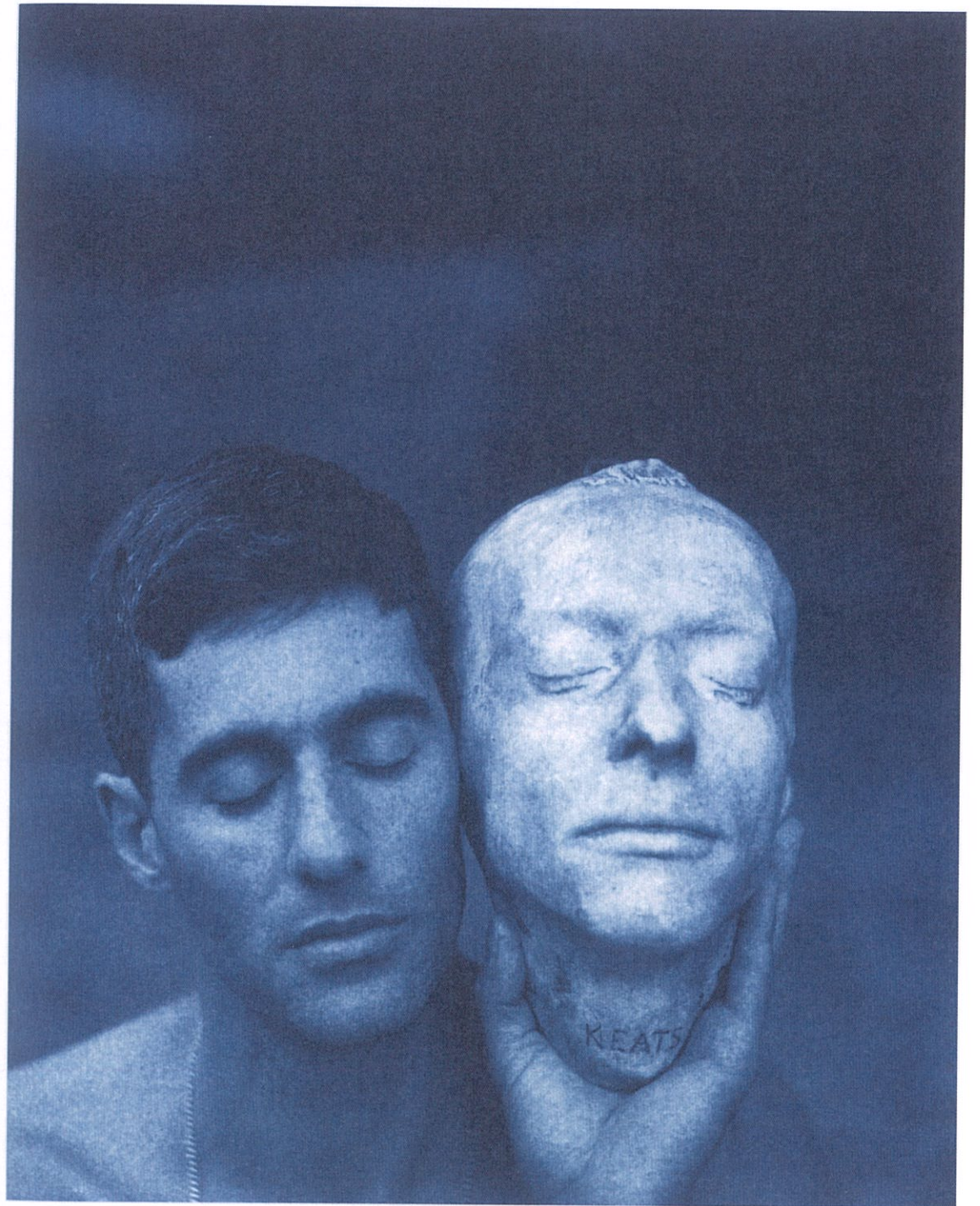
Colorplate 20/Figure 71. Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Stem of Leaves and Flowers*, ca. 1834–1839, 2008. Toned silver-gelatin print from calotype negative. © Hiroshi Sugimoto, courtesy Pace Gallery.



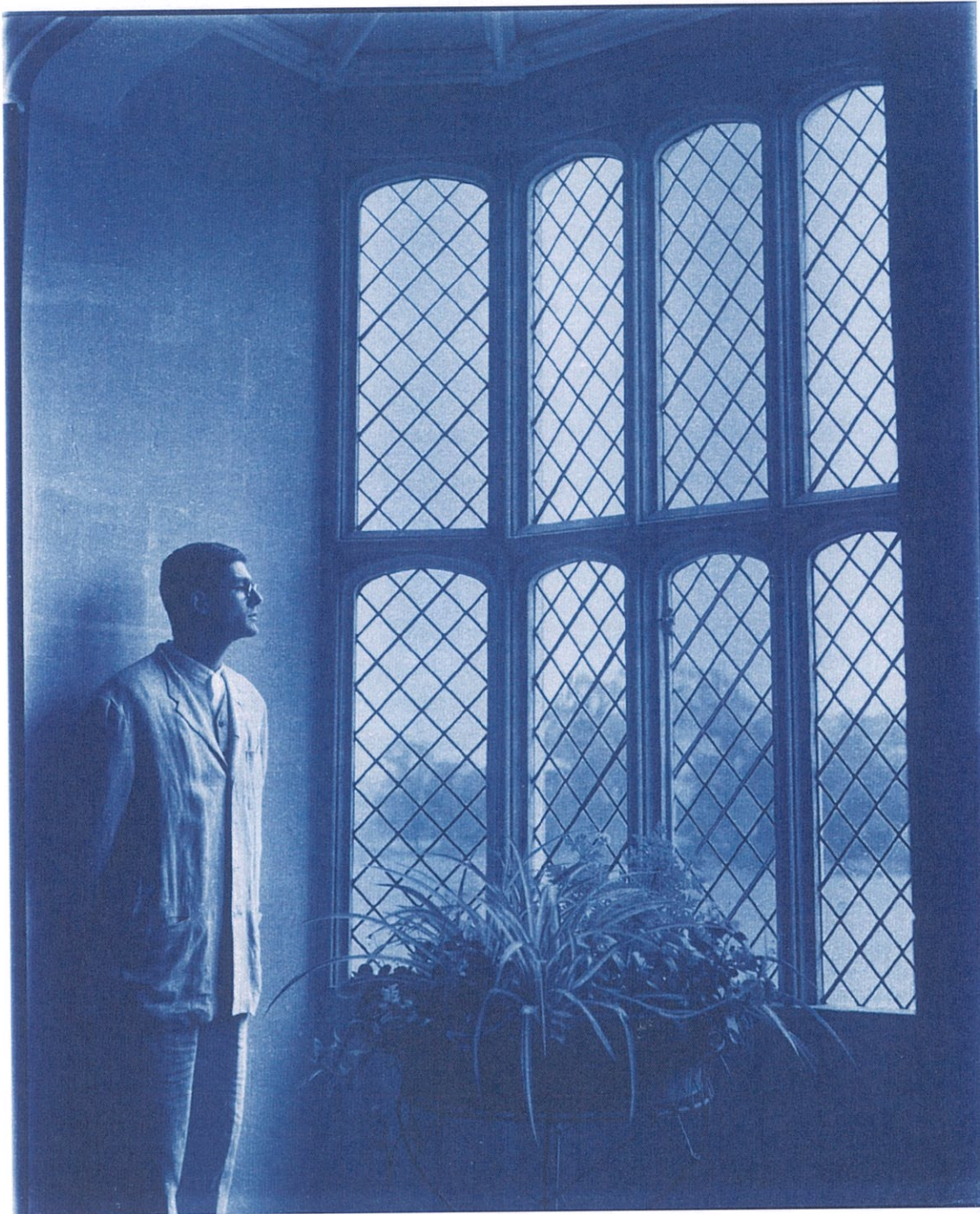
Colorplate 21/Figure 73. J. M. W. Turner, *An Angel Standing in the Sun*, 1846. Oil on canvas. The Tate Britain, London. © Tate, London 2014.



Colorplate 22/Figures 75–77. Chantal Akerman, *La Captive*, 2001 (film stills).



Colorplate 23/Figure 94. John Dugdale, *Death Mask of John Keats*, 1999. Cyanotype. Courtesy of the artist.



Colorplate 24/Figure 95. John Dugdale, *Self-Portrait at Oriel Window*, 1998. Cyanotype. Courtesy of the artist.

and the aims he sets himself in the course of it," he writes. "This produces what might be described as a stereotype plate (or several such), which is constantly repeated—constantly reprinted afresh—in the course of the person's life."¹³

These two kinds of fixity come together in Lacan's account of the ego, which builds on Freud's. The ego is the fantasm through which the modern subject attempts to prove that it is sovereign and self-constituting, he argues in several early essays. It is created through a series of unsustainable identifications with external images, which "situate" the subject "in a fictional direction," which will "only ever asymptotically approach [his] becoming."¹⁴ The "shadow" of his ego also falls on his objects, rendering his relationship to others narcissistic and rivalrous, and leading to bizarre misrecognitions. A child who beats another child says that he was beaten, and a child who sees another child fall behaves as if he had fallen.¹⁵ The introduction of a third term compounds the problem. The subject now desires "an object desired by someone else," which not only mechanizes desire, but also diminishes "the special significance of any one particular object." It becomes "equivalent" to many others,¹⁶ like an industrial photograph. The "rigid structure"¹⁷ of the ego also leads him to project "permanence, identity and substance" onto his objects—qualities that are "very different from the gestalts that experience enables us to isolate in the mobility of the field constructed according to the lines of animal desire."¹⁸ Lacan characterizes what happens to the phenomenal world when it is perceptually frozen as "formal stagnation," and compares it to "the faces of actors when a film is suddenly stopped in mid-frame."¹⁹

The concepts associated with early photography figure even more prominently in *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Like the Freudian psyche, the one described by Proust—and dramatized by his narrator—is a receptive surface, like a photographic plate, on which sensory "impressions" are traced. These impressions are invisible until we are "back at home" and able to illuminate them with the "lamp" of voluntary memory, and even then our vision is limited, because it casts only a narrow pool of light.²⁰ The stream of images that enters the sensory end of the psyche is as labile as the one that enters the camera obscura, and it retains this lability at the level of the unconscious, or what Proust calls "involuntary memory." However, it is inert by the time it reaches consciousness because voluntary memory "begins at once to record photographs independent of one another" and to eliminate "every link" and "sequence between the scenes portrayed in the collection which it exposes to our view."²¹ It also displays only one image at a time, and replaces that one with another only after a long interval; voluntary memory is like a shop in whose window "now one," and "now another photograph of the same person" is exhibited, and in which each new

photograph is “for some time the only one to be seen.”²² Voluntary memory tries to subsume the world to these fixed images. Marcel asks his mother, his grandmother, Gilberte, and Albertine all to play the “leading part” in a play whose plot, incidents, and lines have achieved an “unalterable form.”²³ Consequently, not merely can he visualize only one “photograph” at a time, but it is always the same “photograph”: one structured through and through by an Oedipal logic. “When I lay awake at night and revived old memories of Combray,” the narrator confides, “I saw no more of it than this sort of luminous panel, sharply defined against a vague and shadowy background . . . broad enough at its base, the little parlor, the dining room . . . the hall through which I would journey to the first step of that staircase, so painful to climb . . . and, at the summit, my bedroom, with the little passage through whose glazed door Mama would enter.” It is always summer, and it is always 7 p.m.²⁴

Only “the miracle of an analogy” can lift this spell, and reanimate what the psyche has mortified.²⁵ There is nothing in *À la recherche* that does not rhyme with many other things, but a miraculous analogy requires more than similarity. One half of these double impressions, as Proust calls them, is “sheathed” in an object, and the other half is “prolonged in ourselves.”²⁶ They also link the present to the past, and the psyche to the world. Last, but not least, miraculous analogies issue from a non-human source and reveal themselves to us through a sensory experience that we can neither anticipate nor control. “Whether I considered reminiscences of the kind evoked by the noise of the spoon or the taste of the madeleine, or those truths written with the aid of shapes for whose meaning I searched in my brain,” Proust writes, “where . . . they composed a magical scrawl, complex and elaborate, their essential character was that I was not free to choose them, that such as they were they were given to me.”²⁷

These “hieroglyphs,” whose “patterns are not traced by us,” form a “book.” Although we are not the author of this volume, it is “the only [one] that really belongs to us.”²⁸ When it arrives, we are able to read it, but no one else can. In order to make this book legible to others, we must give it a form that allows it to be “prolonged” in them, because “every reader is, while he is reading, the reader of his own self.”²⁹ We must develop it, in other words, into a work of art. Although Proust sometimes suggests that the artist has more agency in the aesthetic domain than in the perceptual, at other times he uses the same terms to describe both of them. “I had arrived . . . at the conclusion that in fashioning a work of art we are by no means free,” he writes in an important passage in *Time Regained*, “that we do not choose how we shall make it.” The work “pre-exists” us, and we are obliged “to do what we should have to do if it were a law of nature—to discover it.”³⁰

The most famous of Proust’s miraculous analogies is of course the one activated by the taste of the tea-soaked madeleine, and it establishes the template for the others. When the adult Marcel connects the tea and madeleine that his mother brings him on a rainy Parisian day with the tea and madeleine that his aunt Léonie used to give him in Combray, the parts of her house that he had previously been unable to see rise up “like a stage set” and attach themselves to the “isolated segment” that he could see, “and with the house the town, from morning to night and in all weathers,” and “all the flowers in [his family’s] garden and in M. Swann’s park, and the water-lilies on the Vivonne and the good folk of the village and their little dwellings and the parish church and the whole of Combray and its surroundings.”³¹

IN *The Mottled Screen: Reading Proust Visually*, Mieke Bal refers to the structuring role played by Marcel’s “mental vision” in his narration of *In Search of Lost Time* as a “focalization,” and she shows that many passages in the novel are focalized through the lens of an imaginary camera. “The photographic mechanism can be seen at work in the cutting-out of details, in the conflictual dialectic between the near and the far, and in certain ‘zoom’ effects,” she writes. “It can also be seen in the effects of contrast, which prevent or enable the under- or overexposed image to be seen. It appears in the focusing, when the image oscillates between clarity and indistinction.”³²

In an essay that was the starting point for this book, which I wrote for a volume devoted to Bal, I argued that there are two focalizers in *À la recherche*, “both of whom use the first-person pronoun, have the same name, and are closely related to each other: the Marcel who used to go to bed early, and the one who reflects upon this phenomenon from a subsequent moment in time.”³³ I still think that there are two focalizers in the novel, but I believe that they can be better described through the distinction that I introduced in chapter 3 than the one I used earlier: the distinction between an optical intelligence and a liquid intelligence. I take these concepts from Jeff Wall, who associates optical intelligence with “the projectile or ballistic nature of human vision when it is augmented and intensified” by glass and machinery, and liquid intelligence with “the archaism of water, of liquid chemicals,” that connects photography to memory, the past, and “ancient production-processes.”³⁴ As Wall intimates, optical intelligence is a specifically *human* intelligence. Liquid intelligence is photographic, but it also courses through our psychic veins, and it is the great ocean in which we all swim.

As Brassai points out in his wonderful Proust book,³⁵ when the narrator likens the cup of tea in which he dips his madeleine to the bowl of water in which the Japanese place “little pieces of paper” that are “without character

or form" when they are dry, "but, the moment they become wet, stretch and twist and take on colour and distinctive shape, become flowers or houses or people,"³⁶ he is implicitly comparing both of them to the developing bath. The "uneven cobblestones, the stretched napkin, the boot, the spoon tapping a plate, [and] the copy of *François le Champi*" are also "developers."³⁷ These miraculous analogies have a profound effect on Marcel's subjectivity. In the opening pages of *Swann's Way*, in which he details some of the memories that were recovered through the tea and madeleine, he, too, stretches and twists, and becomes flowers and houses and people. "For a long time I would go to bed early," the narrator recounts. "Sometimes, the candle barely out, my eyes closed so quickly that I did not have time to tell myself: 'I'm falling asleep.' And half an hour later the thought that it was time to look for sleep would awaken me; I would make as if to put away the book which I imagined was still in my hands, and to blow out the light; I had gone on thinking, while I was asleep, about what I had just been reading, but . . . it seemed to me that I myself was the immediate subject of my book: a church, a quartet, the rivalry between François I and Charles V."³⁸ During this astonishing meditation, which continues for several pages, there are no "beings," only multitudinous "becomings."

Albertine is another instantiation of liquid intelligence. The first few times Marcel encounters the band of girls, he registers their features, but he has difficulty determining to whom they belong. "Except for one, whose straight nose and dark complexion singled her out from the rest," he confides, ". . . they were known to me only by a pair of hard, obstinate and mocking eyes, for instance, or by cheeks whose pinkness had a coppery tint reminiscent of geraniums; and even these features I had not indissolubly attached to any one of these girls rather than to another."³⁹ Later Marcel "deals" these features into little "heaps,"⁴⁰ attaches names to them, and identifies Albertine as the object of his desire, but she proves as elusive in isolation as she was in the group. Sometimes she is "thin, with a grey complexion, a sullen air, and a violet transparency slanting across her eyes." On other occasions, "happiness [bathes her] cheeks with a radiance so mobile that the skin, grown fluid and vague, [gives] passage to a sort of subcutaneous glaze," or her face draws his desires "on to its varnished surface," but prevents them from "going further."⁴¹

Marcel is "refreshed" by this "spectacle of forms undergoing an incessant process of change," that "recalls that perpetual re-creation of the primordial elements of nature which we contemplate when we stand before the sea,"⁴² and once again it "liquefies" his own ego. "I . . . developed the habit of becoming a different person," Marcel confides, "according to the particular Albertine to whom my thoughts had turned: a jealous, an indifferent, a voluptuous, a mel-

ancholy, a frenzied person."⁴³ So heterogeneous are "the selves who . . . thought about Albertine," he adds near the end of this passage, that each ought really to have a different name; "I ought still more to give a different name to each of the Albertines who appeared before me, never the same, like those seas . . . that succeeded one another and against which, a nymph likewise, she was silhouetted."⁴⁴

PROUSTIAN DEVELOPMENT not only resurrects the dead and reanimates the living; it is also conjunctive. The word "and" appears so many times in the periodic sentence with which the madeleine passage ends that we eventually see that there is nothing that could not emerge from Marcel's famous cup of tea. As both Rilke and Benjamin note, this and many other passages in *À la recherche* also connect the novel's readers to the narrator and one another. In a 1914 letter, Rilke describes what would happen if a group of people were to read *Swann's Way* together. "One person or another would read aloud what especially struck home to him out of the inexhaustible pages and would hold it out in a specific way to the general opinion," he writes, ". . . [and] to many a one his own childhood would appear out of half-oblivion, and one would pass from tale to tale far into the summer night, but also far into the mutually true, rich and alive."⁴⁵ Benjamin arrives at a similar conclusion in "The Image of Proust." "When Proust in a well-known passage described the hour that was most his own," he observes, "he did it in such a way that everyone can find it in his own existence. We might almost call it an everyday hour."⁴⁶

But important as this community is, it is not the republic for which we have been waiting. Only those who are willing to embrace an even more miraculous analogy are admitted to this republic: the one called "chiasmus." Marcel acknowledges that the relationship between himself and Albertine is reciprocal and reversible in the passage with which I ended the last section, but he refuses to affirm it. Although he "ought"—as he puts it—to give a different name to each of the Albertines who appeared to him, and each of the selves who thought about her, he does not do so. And in a related passage, in which the narrator uses the distinction between a negative and a positive photograph to describe the similarities that link him to Gilberte and Albertine, thereby showing that he sees the "recto/verso" as a relational principle, he represents himself as the author of this analogy. "If in this craze for amusement Albertine might be said to echo something of the old original Gilberte," he observes, "that is because a certain similarity exists, although the type evolves, between all the women we successively love, a similarity that is due to the fixity of our temperament . . . They are, these women, a product of our temperament, an image, an inverted projection, a negative of our sensibility."⁴⁷

Proust also turns in making this argument to a different definition of photography: the one established through the industrialization of the medium. Suddenly the photographic image is a representation instead of an analogy, a human construct instead of a photogenic drawing, and fixed rather than dynamic. The distinction between the positive and the negative is also absolute, and the development process irreversible. The narrator denies that this is a reciprocal relationship in another way as well: by claiming the first person pronoun not just for himself but for all other men, and by using the third-person pronoun to designate the many women desired by this male monolith.

This is not the only occasion on which the narrator attempts to negate the chiasmus, or that he turns for this purpose to industrial photography. In another passage in *Within a Budding Grove*, Saint-Loup offers to take a photograph of Marcel's grandmother. Since she knows that she will soon die, and sees this as a way of providing her grandson with a lasting image of herself, she accepts his offer "with a joyful air," and searches for a flattering hat and her "nicest dress."⁴⁸ Marcel is extremely irritated by his grandmother's "vanity," but rather than accepting her offer to forgo the photograph, he encourages her to have it taken, and then ruins it with a few "sarcastic and wounding words."⁴⁹ As Bal points out, this story resurfaces a number of times,⁵⁰ and on one of the occasions when Marcel returns to it he admits that what really angered him was not his grandmother's vanity but rather the fact that she was orienting herself toward Saint-Loup's look—a look to which he had no access. To make matters worse, the unknowable person she was on her way to becoming would be authenticated and immortalized by the camera, and this would prove that his grandmother was not "created solely" for him.⁵¹ He tries to recover his egoic footing by producing a counter-photograph.

In a related passage, Marcel enters the drawing room and sees his grandmother absorbed in thoughts that she has never allowed him to "see." For a moment, he becomes a "spectator to [his] own absence"; he realizes that she continues to exist when he is not there, and that even when he is with her, he is not seeing all of her. This alarming thought yields to the bizarre fantasy that a stranger has just entered the room, and is photographing his grandmother as she would appear if he were not there to protect her. What this imaginary camera sees is a "red-faced" woman sitting on a sofa beneath a lamp, who is "heavy and vulgar, sick, day-dreaming, [and] letting her slightly crazed eyes wander over a book."⁵² Although this apparatus is clearly a fantasmatic extension of his own look, Marcel spends most of the rest of the paragraph deploring the photographer's cruelty. He also maintains that the unflattering photograph is *objectively* true.

Albertine's look denotes an even more radical alterity—and one that in-

cludes Marcel, thereby making him a stranger to himself. "If she had seen me, what could I have represented to her?" he asks himself later in the same volume. "From the depths of what universe did she discern me? . . . If we thought that the eyes of such a girl were merely two glittering sequins of mica, we should not be athirst to know her and to unite her life to ours. But we sense that what shines in those reflecting discs . . . [are] the dark shadows, unknown to us, of the ideas that the person cherishes about the people and places she knows."⁵³

Although there are no explicit references to photography in this passage, Marcel expresses his desire to plumb the depths of this "universe," and he later attempts to satisfy this desire by kissing her. When he approaches Albertine for this purpose, she turns not just into a grainy photograph, but one that can be viewed from a potentially infinite number of angles, only one of which can be occupied at a time. "At first, as my mouth began gradually to approach the cheeks which my eyes had recommended it to kiss," Marcel writes, "my eyes, in changing position, saw a different pair of cheeks; the neck, observed at closer range and as though through a magnifying-glass, showed in its coarser grain a robustness which modified the character of the face."⁵⁴

In all of these passages, what activates the narrator's anxiety and motivates him to aim a mental camera at the world is the discovery that there are blind spots in his field of vision. He reaches for a Pistolgraph instead of a pistol because these visual occlusions are part of what Benjamin would later call the "optical unconscious." At its most rudimentary, the optical unconscious consists of those aspects of the visible world that are too small for us to see, or that occur too quickly for us to register, but which photography and film make available through close-ups and slow motion. But photography also reveals another kind of optical unconscious: it shows us that the world presents itself differently to the camera than to the human eye.⁵⁵

If the world discloses a different side of itself to the camera than it does to us, then we can see only what it permits us to see. It must also present different aspects of itself to different looks, and since we are part of the world, we—too—must reveal dimensions of ourselves to others that are unavailable to us. We cannot neutralize the threat that this poses to our unity and autonomy by underscoring the subjectivity of human vision, because perspective is not something we bring to visual phenomena. It is internal to their Being, and it dramatically restricts what we can know about ourselves and the world. The optical unconscious proved considerably more difficult for the modern subject to assimilate than the discovery that the photographic image derives from an external source, and even some of the most ardent practitioners of photography by other means were unable to accept it.

IN THE PARAGRAPH after the one in which Marcel compares Albertine to a constantly changing photograph, he talks about photographs into which multiple viewpoints have been crammed, presumably so as to overcome the limits of human vision. He emphasizes the absurdity of this project by comparing it to his own attempt to get behind Albertine's eyes by kissing her, and by suggesting that the photographic image has a directly contrary effect upon the human eye. "I can think of nothing that can to so great a degree as a kiss evoke out of what we believed to be a thing with one definite aspect the hundred other things which it may equally well be," he wryly observes, "since each is related to a no less legitimate perspective."⁵⁶

Proust also tries to make room for others in the last volume of his novel by abstracting away from sensory experience to universal laws, but this leads to a generalization of the first-person pronoun, rather than a greater accommodation of the second.⁵⁷ A new Marcel also emerges in some passages in *Time Regained*—one whose perceptual coordinates are closer to "radiography" than to photography. As the narrator suggests in *Within a Budding Grove*, this is a mortifying optic; it peels away the "tiny particles of epidermis whose varied combinations form the florid originality of human flesh" to reveal the "joyless universality of a skeleton."⁵⁸ Marcel recoils from this kind of looking in the second volume of *In Search of Lost Time*, but he later justifies it as the necessary condition for art making. A book is "a huge cemetery in which on the majority of the tombs the names are effaced," he writes in *Time Regained*.⁵⁹

There is one passage in the last volume of Proust's novel, though, where the narrator not only acknowledges that the world reveals different aspects of itself to every seer but also expresses the desire to leave his cork-lined room, and re-enter the "loud, clamoring, semi-visible world."⁶⁰ He stops talking about art as the purveyor of universal truths and begins thinking of it as the agency through which looks that would otherwise remain completely sealed off might somehow communicate with one another. "Through art alone are we able to emerge from ourselves," Proust writes in *Time Regained*, "to know what another person sees of a universe that is not the same as our own and of which, without art, the landscapes would remain as unknown to us as those that may exist on the moon."⁶¹ And although he is no closer to uttering the second-person pronoun here than he is when he characterizes Albertine as "a product of [his] temperament," he is clearly trying to make the first-person pronoun a lot more capacious.

THE REVERSE FIELD that was disclosed through the negative/positive distinction did not disappear after the industrialization of photography; it remained stubbornly in place, and although neither Sartre nor Merleau-Ponty

links it to the so-called "medium," they are obsessed with it. Both philosophers also respond to the passage in which Proust attempts to make room for other landscapes and looks. In chapter 3 of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre tells a story about a man who visits a public park. The man is alone at first, and everything seems to radiate out from his look, but then someone else enters the park, who perceives it from a different position, and toward whom the "raw green" of the lawn turns a different "face."⁶² The "whole universe" slides away from him, and toward the interloper.⁶³ The man tries to recover his equilibrium by reasoning that since he sees the latter, he is still the perceiving subject, and the Other the object of his look, but he is prevented from doing so by an even more distressing realization: the realization that the Other is also looking at him. What is true of the "raw green" of the lawn is also true of him; he turns a different face to the Other than he does to himself, and it will forever elude him.

This is a reversible but not a reciprocal relationship; either one sees or one is seen. The same principle obtains at the level of language; Sartre narrates the story from the first man's perspective, in direct discourse, and he refers to the second man with the third-person pronoun. At the outset, "I" means "the one who sees," and "he" means "the one who is seen," but at a certain point the speaker realizes that "the truth of 'seeing-the-Other'" is "being-seen-by-the-Other." Since this is an unavoidable objectification, "I" must signify the one who is seen. "Thus I, who in so far as I am my possibles, am what I am not and am not what I am—behold, now I am somebody!" he exclaims. "And the one who I am—and who on principle escapes me—I am he in the midst of the world in so far as he escapes me."⁶⁴ But the first-person pronoun is nothing without the second, and it soon devolves into the third.

Merleau-Ponty responds to this section of *Being and Nothingness* as well as to the passage which Sartre attempts to rebut in *The Visible and Invisible*. He begins by not only agreeing with a number of Sartre's claims but strengthening them. If two men entered a park, he writes, the "raw green" of the landscape would indeed turn a different "face" to each of them, since we all have our "own depth," and this depth is "backed up" by what we see. We "espouse" the aspects of the visible world with which we are in "pre-established harmony"—with the things that are the equivalent "on the outside" of what we are "on the inside."⁶⁵ What the second man saw when he entered the park would also escape the first. The face that the world turns toward us is "only for our vision and our body"; it cannot be seen by anyone else. And since it shows different aspects of itself to other seers, what each of us sees is only the "surface of an inexhaustible depth."

But once he has detailed these points of commonality, Merleau-Ponty parts company with Sartre and aligns himself with Proust. He extends what the novelist says about art to speech, and he makes this linguistic mediation one of the cornerstones of his phenomenology. Our perceptions are not hermetically sealed, Merleau-Ponty argues, because language allows us to share them with one another. When I look at a landscape with someone else, and each of us describes what we see to the other, “the individual green of the meadow under my eyes invades his vision without quitting my own,” and I “recognize” his green in mine. Our landscapes “interweave,” and we realize that “it is not I who sees, or *he* who sees,” but rather a “vision in general” that sees, and that “inhabits” both of us.⁶⁶

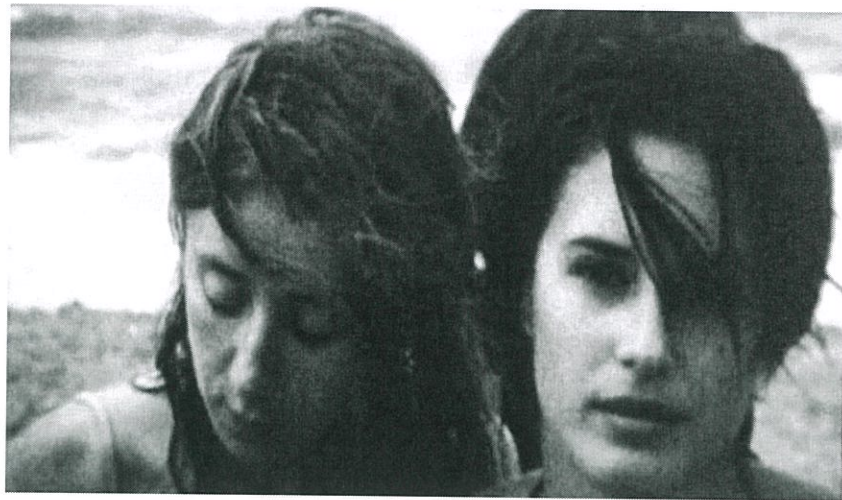
Merleau-Ponty clearly grasps the significance of the pronominal antithesis that figures so prominently in Sartre’s account of the look, because he emphasizes it here. He also makes dialogue the agency of its resolution. Oddly, though, he does not utter the word on which all dialogue depends; instead of replacing the third-person pronoun with the second, he leaps to “vision in general.” He thus inadvertently promotes *impersonality*, instead of *relationality*, just as Proust does in the final volume of his novel. I want to end this chapter with a work that satisfies all three definitions of the chiasmus, and that will help us to see how interdependent they are: Chantal Akerman’s filmic “renovation”⁶⁷ of *In Search of Lost Time*, *The Captive* (2001).

THE CAPTIVE opens with credits over a 35mm nocturnal shot of the sea. This shot—which comes slowly and moodily into focus—is accompanied by the sound of crashing waves. The transition from it to the film “proper” is unusually smooth, since the first scene also begins with a frontal shot of a seascape, accompanied by the sound of waves. Now, though, the sun is high in the sky, and a group of girls are playing in the water. This shot is also grainier than the one that precedes it, and it is followed by a series of handheld and equally grainy shots of the girls and the water. The sound of a film projector competes with—and eventually replaces—the sound of waves, and from time to time we hear the “click” of a still camera.

Two girls leave the water and approach the camera: Ariane and Andrée, Akerman’s Albertine and Andrée. They pause briefly in front of the camera, allowing the photographer to study their faces, and their friends gather around them. Then the girls begin playing with a soccer ball on the beach, and the image becomes once again hard to read. The photographer attempts to follow their movements, but the jerkiness of his handheld camera renders them even less intelligible. Eventually he manages to isolate Ariane from the others, and he moves from a close-up to an extreme close-up of her face.



Figures 75–77/Colorplate 22. Chantal Akerman, *La Captive*, 2001 (film stills).



Figures 78–80. Chantal Akerman, *La Captive*, 2001 (film stills).

Akerman cuts away from this close-up to a 35mm shot of Simon, the counterpart in her film for the narrator in Proust's novel. He stands beside a projector, which he is using to screen a film. It is a home movie, presumably shot by him, and the source of the grainy images at which we have been looking. The projector permits us to identify the mechanical "whirr" that competes with and eventually drowns out the crashing waves. At first, it also seems responsible for the mysterious "click," since Simon repeatedly stops the projector and rewinds a bit of film, and each time he does so, we hear this sound. Before long, though, it becomes evident that the "click" is the auditory exteriorization of a *mental* camera. Akerman also treats the amateur camera and the film projector as perceptual metaphors. She uses the blur that results when unpredictable movements are filmed with a handheld camera, and then re-photographed with a higher-resolution camera, to depict the "spectacle of forms undergoing an incessant process of change"⁶⁸; the clicking sound to dramatize Simon's perception, which transforms this mobile beauty into a series of still photographs; and the stopping and starting of the projector to suggest another sort of arrestation—that through which the ego attempts to stabilize itself, and master the world.⁶⁹

As the camera holds on Simon, he says, "*Je . . . je . . . je . . . vous.*" Since he looks at Ariane as he utters these words, she is obviously the referent for one of them, but it is impossible to determine which, since he could be speaking either for her or for himself. These pronouns become even shiftier when the camera cuts back to the home movie. Ariane and Andrée stand together on the beach, against the backdrop of the sea. They are wrapped in towels, and lean into each other like lovers, but—because they stand with their backs to the sun—their faces are difficult to make out. As we look at this ambiguous shot, we hear



Figure 81. Chantal Akerman, *La Captive*, 2001 (film still).



Figure 82. Chantal Akerman, *La Captive*, 2001 (film still).

Simon utter the following words, from an off-screen position: “*je . . . je vous . . . je vous . . . je vous aime bien.*”

Since “*vous*” is the plural as well as the formal version of the second-person pronoun in French, its field of possible referents now expands to include Andrée. Initially, this expansion seems to secure Simon in the position of the “*je*,” but before long another possibility emerges: the possibility that the first- and second-person pronouns are reversible designators for Ariane and Andrée. The camera returns to Simon, who repeats these words, but this time he smiles as he speaks, and there is a lilt to his voice. It then cuts back to the home movie, and remains facing in this direction until the end of the scene. Simon approaches the screen, sits down in front of it, and presses his face against Ariane’s image. His head forms an oversized shadow in the lower-left frame. From this strange position, which is simultaneously inside and outside the home movie, Simon again says, “*Je vous aime bien.*” The emphasis now falls as much upon the last two words as the first two. In this iteration, “*aimer bien*” means not only “to love a lot,” but also “to love well.”

In *The Captive*, as in the novel it analogizes, the central male character derives erotic gratification from pressing against the female body. Proust represents this as a masturbatory sexuality, but in *The Mottled Screen* Bal links it to “the image of the breasts of two women pressed flat against one another” that Marcel sees while watching Albertine and Andrée dance together, and that “plunges” him into “jealous rage.”⁷⁰ As we have already seen, physical contact is also an important part of Talbot’s photographic process, and of Merleau-Ponty’s chiasmus, which is tactile as well as visual. Akerman retains this aspect



Figure 83. Chantal Akerman, *La Captive*, 2001 (film still).



Figure 84. Chantal Akerman, *La Captive*, 2001 (film still).

of the Proustian narrative, but she makes it a source of female as well as male pleasure.

Simon climaxes twice while pressing against Ariane’s body, and both times she also manifests extreme sexual pleasure. She enjoys this activity, she explains later in the film, because it is non-invasive—because it does not encroach upon her physical or (even more importantly) her psychic interiority. She is therefore free to think about Andrée while experiencing corporeal pleasure with Simon, i.e., to be with both of them at the same time.⁷¹ The second time he says “*Je vous aime bien*,” he acknowledges that his own pleasure derives from the same source—that he loves Ariane because she and Andrée love each other.

The third time, he goes even further: he affirms their right to address these words to each other. And since by doing this, he loves them *well*, he also finds his own way back to the “*je*.”

This scene relies heavily upon the shot/reverse shot formation. Since this device is often used within normative cinema to construct sexual difference and conceal the presence of the camera, Akerman ostentatiously avoids it in two of her most celebrated films, *Jeanne Dielman* (1975) and *News from Home* (1976). This is not, however, the role for which it is “destined.” The shot/reverse shot is structurally linked to the recto and verso of the camera obscura’s image stream and Talbot’s double reversals, and it houses the same power. Akerman mobilizes this power here, through another “renovation.” Ariane and Andrée are separated from Simon by the fourth wall, so they shouldn’t be able to return his look, but they miraculously *do*. After he acknowledges the interdependence of his desire for Ariane, and hers for Andrée, and affirms the girls’ right to say “*je vous aime bien*” to each other, they respond by smiling first at each other, and then at him. And when Simon walks over to the screen, and presses his head against Ariane’s image, *he* responds to *their* response.

Akerman often signals her authorial presence by correlating the height of the camera to her own look—i.e., by positioning it lower than usual.⁷² She follows this practice when filming Simon, but because these shots establish him as the source of the home movie, this is easy to miss. However, in the last shot of this scene, Akerman alerts us to the fact that there is a second focalizer in a number of different ways: by not moving her camera when Simon does; by continuing to film the screen from a standing position after he sits down;



Figure 85. Chantal Akerman, *La Captive*, 2001 (film still).



Figure 86. Chantal Akerman, *La Captive*, 2001 (film still).

by dramatizing the lateral distance separating him from the camera by situating his head in the left corner of the image; and by showing Ariane and Andrée looking away from him, toward another seer.

We recognize this focalizer from other Akerman films—not just as a formally rigorous eye, but also as a person named “Chantal,” who is Jewish, Belgian, and a lesbian. The parallels between *The Captive* and *Je tu il elle* (1974) are particularly striking. In the latter film, Akerman plays a lesbian who seduces a former girlfriend, and during their lovemaking the two women press their bodies passionately together. The title of the film also consists entirely of pronouns. Chantal is the only character who appears in every scene, which might seem to entitle her to the “*je*,” but there are also two other claimants to this position, and times when she is more closely aligned with one of the other pronouns. In the second part of the film, she is picked up on the side of a road by a truck driver. He commandeers the first-person pronoun by doing most of the talking, thereby assigning the second-person pronoun to her. Chantal later gives him a “hand-job,” at which point she could be a “you,” a “she,” or an “I,” and he a “you,” a “he,” or an “I.” In the scene in which she visits her former girlfriend, each exercises power, and then has it wrested away from her by the other. The “I” and “you” shift positions at a dizzying rate, both literally and metaphorically, and the surprisingly frank way in which Akerman films their lovemaking marks both of them as a “she.” As Ivone Margulies so elegantly puts it, the four pronouns in the title of the film “seem to be on call, performing rituals of abeyance.”⁷³

Things are every bit as labile in *The Captive*, both within the fiction and at the level of the enunciation. Here, however, Akerman is less contestatory. She



Figure 87. Chantal Akerman, *Je tu il elle*, 1976 (film still).

emphasizes the impossibility of replacing Simon's look with hers by depicting it as a blind spot within her own field of vision. She also presents her look as a *second* vantage point from which to observe and desire the band of girls, rather than an alternative to it. Last, but not least, Akerman shows these two looks meeting at the site of Ariane's body, like the landscape invoked by Proust, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty. If we were to translate this meeting into language, it would read: "*je . . . vous . . . je vous.*" This chapter is the site of a similar exchange. In it, two old friends meet each other through a book they both love, and give and receive the "you."



Figure 88. Chantal Akerman, *La Captive*, 2001 (film still).

Chapter 6

POSTHUMOUS PRESENCE

IN 1936, Walter Benjamin produced the theory for which George Eastman's 1888 camera seemed to call. The photographic image isn't analogical, he announced in "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," and it doesn't originate in the world; it is, rather, a reproduction, generated by a machine. The medium is also a tool for us to use as we see fit: for generating evidence, disseminating images, expanding the field of human knowledge, and effecting political change. Benjamin's relationship to photography is so unquestioningly instrumental that he even emphasizes the essay's own use-value in its 1938 version. "In what follows," he writes in the introduction, "the concepts which are introduced into the theory of art differ from those now current in that they are completely useless for the purposes of fascism. On the other hand, they are useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art."¹

In *The Promise of Social Happiness*, the companion volume to this book, I will trace the torturous train of thought that led Benjamin to this argument, and explore its consequences for leftist thought and art making. I will also talk about three moments in the postwar period in which the photographic image recovered its saving power: the one in which Susan Weil and Robert Rauschenberg made their cyanotype photograms and Rauschenberg his early combines; the one in which a group of artists began using the photographic image as the basis for a new kind of figurative painting; and the one in which large-format photographs began appearing on the walls of museums and galleries. In the concluding chapter of this book, I want to show how alien "The Work of Art" is to Benjamin's own thought, and to explore his *other* theory of photography—the theory that he develops in an earlier essay.

The central concept in Benjamin's 1936 definition of photography, and the vehicle through which he links it to the "masses," is "sameness." "The stripping of the veil from the object, the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose 'sense for sameness in the world' has so increased that by reproduction it extracts sameness even from what is unique . . .," he proclaims