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The Affective Pleasure of Photobiography: Gazes and Mental Images in Roland Barthes and Eileen Chang

The difference between word and image is like a territorial border. Although these two media are arguably complementary techniques and practices of manipulating signs and creating effects on the spectator, the affective pleasure underlying word-image interactions in literary texts is perplexing. Why do authors look at images? What exactly touches them in the picture? How do image and narrative afford differing sensual perceptions and drive the author to combine them in specific contexts? To address these questions, we need to move beyond aesthetical strategies of image-text and examine visual perception in the literary mode of description. Focusing on the issue of vision and literary visuality, which tends to be overlooked, this paper examines two photobiographies, Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (1980) and Eileen Chang's *Looking at Each Other* (1994). Both authors show a strong attachment with their mothers when looking at a photograph related to her – one represents Barthes's mother at the age of five, and the other represents Chang at a similar age and was coloured by her mother; both authors reflect on the relationship between gaze, sensation, and affective visual memory in their viewing experience but implicitly represent it by setting up different intricately woven laceworks of gazes. I argue that the circulation of intimate gazes is paramount in understanding enjoyment in writing, and by extension, the reading process of photobiography. I suggest that gazes, either perceptually reciprocal or displaced, do not fall into a simple binary opposition of self versus other. Instead, they bridge the gap between the author as a writing subject and as the object of scrutiny and narration, word and image, photobiography's form and content. Barthes and Chang gaze in order to look back on those looking at them; but they also look at their limited horizon, which is always being constructed by others' looks, in order to question their own look.