Text and Image in Women's Life Writing

Picturing the Female Self

Edited by
Valérie Baisnée-Keay
Corinne Bigot
Nicoleta Alexoae-Zagni
Stephanie Genty
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Introduction

Valérie Baisnée-Keay

The contemporary proliferation of images has not only affected life writing in many ways, but has also changed our critical perspective on the genre, fostering a transdisciplinary and multimodal approach to its study in the wake of the "iconic turn" in art history and visual studies (Moxey 2008).[1] If graphic memoirs are the most noteworthy examples of that phenomenon, other genres of life writing, itself a form of self-representation, have engaged with images, spurring a reflection on the text-image dialogue in past recollections. Images, especially photographs, have often been included in autobiographies, memoirs, or diaries, to name a few, with the purpose of supplementing, making more complex, or disturbing the written narrative. As Laura Marcus (2018) points out, it is the advent of photography in the early nineteenth century that created a new and more intense relationship between text and visual image, coinciding with the

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[1] In art history and visual studies, the disciplines that study visual culture, the terms "pictorial" and "iconic turn" found in Boehm (1994) and Mitchell (1994) emphasize the need for a change of paradigm in approaching visual artifacts: these should not only be interpreted or read, but also experienced. So the pictorial turn is in actual fact ontological (Moxey 2008).

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establishment of autobiography as a genre. Today, it is the explosion of the use of social media networks that revolutionizes and multiplies possibilities for text-image combinations.

The essays presented in this collection focus on the diverse and multiple visual elements in British and American women's life writing from the end of the nineteenth century to the start of the twenty-first. They all acknowledge the cultural dimension at the heart of images, and especially how gender affects the way images are produced and read. The term, life writing, is used here as "a signifier of generic category," as Marlene Kadar (1992, 20) puts it, to emphasize a feminist canon that had been neglected in traditional autobiographical studies until the 1980s. By linking the personal to the political, the feminist critique that challenged male-dominated studies of autobiography from the 1980s to today has played a central role, not only in expanding and valorizing the field of life writing but also in sharpening theoretical tools for reading autobiographically. Addressing the multifaceted relationship between text and image in a body of woman's life writing, this book aims at contributing to those feminist interventions into the field.

Until recently, representations of women by women in art and history books have been few and far between compared with male representations of "woman." The pioneering role of female photographers—in the early days of photography—can be seen as evidence, on the woman's part, to represent herself on her own terms, as subject (or agent) rather than as object. On the other hand, images may also accentuate narcissistic readings of women's works and may suggest they cannot rise above the personal. To reclaim visibility for themselves, women artists may "reoccupy" narcissism and use it strategically, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue in the introduction of *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance* (2002, 13–14), by making the personal political and by transforming self-representations into acts of resistance to social and sexual roles. Thus, images of women and by women remain at the center of a political and cultural struggle: the struggle for women to resist objectification and to have a "say" in their own representations. A central theme in the essays, the manipulation of images, can be used for or against women.

Before looking at the way images are intertwined in women's memoirs and other life-writing texts, a number of theoretical assumptions about the relationships between text and image needs to be examined. First, what kind of images are we talking about? The common notion of image has always been thought of as being self-evident, as something that does not

require explaining. For W.J.T. Mitchell (1986), however, there is a methodological issue in trying to define the nature of images. The main problem is that defining images with ideas is tantamount to explaining images by images: the word "idea" comes from the Greek *eidon* which means *image*. Hence, instead of looking into the nature of images (or intension in linguistics), Mitchell chooses to define them by their extension: his list includes "pictures, statues, optical illusions, maps, diagrams, dreams, hallucinations, spectacles, projections, poems, patterns, memories, and even ideas as images" (1986, 9). This definition mixes material and mental images as Mitchell aims at breaking down the barriers between the very different disciplines that take images as objects. But this definition also poses methodological problems, as it rests on the notion of resemblance that supposedly binds all images: images are not a copy of reality, but something close to it. This in turn separates images from words. Indeed, an image of a dog looks like a dog, but the word "dog" doesn't look like a dog. Resemblance does not characterize all images, however. In his essay, *The Future of the Image* (2019), Jacques Rancière argues that an image may resemble reality, but when it becomes art, it alters reality and deviates from the techniques that produced it (2003, 15). In doing so, the artistic image creates another form of resemblance.

Research into multimodality, in particular text-image combinations, is relatively recent. John A. Bateman (2014, 31) dates it back to the groundbreaking work of Roland Barthes in the 1960s. In *Elements of Semiology*, published in 1964, Barthes followed up on Saussure's idea of a science of signs of which linguistics would form a branch. Barthes aimed at extending linguistic concepts to "any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex association of all these" (9). Thus, Barthes paved the way for a discourse theory that would include different modes of signification. As for text-image relations, he created a system of classification that scholars continue to use today to discuss text-image relations, and that Bateman (2014, 35) has represented in the diagram below:

TEXT-IMAGE RELATIONSHIP → unequal → **amplifying** [anchorage] *text 'amplifies' image* / **reducing** [illustration] *image 'reduces' text*; **equal** [relay]
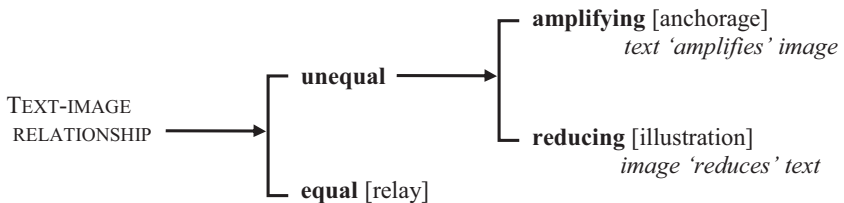
However, semiotics' claim to englobe all systems of meaning, making language the model for all symbolic systems, has also been criticized.[2] In semiotics, both text and image are considered part of language. This leads to reading image as text, assuming that only words can make sense of an image. Yet, an image does not need a text to exist. As Rancière (2019) points out, an image has a life of its own; images have their own ways of producing their forms of identity and otherness. The domination of some systems of thought over others means that aesthetics cannot be separated from politics; any definitive view of the relation between text and image, including semiotics, is infused with power relations. In *Iconology*, Mitchell argues that the relationship between text and image has often been viewed as competitive, with each symbolic system claiming to be closer to true representation. That opposition has a long history marked by different ideological phases, opposing iconophile and iconophobic positions. With the linguistic turn in the twentieth century, the domination of language as a system of thought made the relationship between text and image an unequal one: language was viewed as being constitutive of social and individual life, while visuality was associated with mass media manipulation and the commodification of people. How does the discourse on text-image relations affect life writing? Bearing in mind these ideological positions, I shall address four notions at the heart of life-writing narratives which are challenged by the confrontation/juxtaposition of text and images: memory, identity, referentiality, and embodiment.

IMAGES AND MEMORY

Flicking through a family album, whether printed or digital, to reminisce about the past is a familiar experience for many people, rendered even more popular by the exponential use of digital photography. This way of remembering is a more common practice than writing memoirs. There is no doubt that images are closely involved in the process of remembering. For some scholars, the link between memory and images is constitutive: representing the past necessarily involves having an image of it. But there is also a long philosophical tradition associating memory and imagination, considered as the lowest form of knowledge (Ricœur 2000, 5). As a consequence, the idea that memory is a faithful record of the past has suffered from its negative association with images, considered by

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[2] Mitchell mentions the philosopher Nelson Goodman as the main critic of semiotics.

philosophers as untrue or fantastical. Yet, as Ricœur (2000) points out, we have nothing better than memory to remember the past.

There is no denying that our remembrance is visual; images have the power to materialize memories. But images are not only a medium by which we remember, alongside other forms of mediated memories; they are part and parcel of what we remember. Cultural memory is always mediated, so how we remember will affect what we remember.

Moreover, memories do not take place in a vacuum. In his ground-breaking work about memory, social scientist Maurice Halbwachs famously said that we cannot remember outside the social: personal memories are bound up in the collective memory of a culture. For survivors of trauma, this link is even more significant. Marianne Hirsch coined the term "post-memory" to refer to a specific kind of memory situated between personal memory and History, a term she develops in relation to Holocaust survivors and which she defines as "second-generation memories of cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences" (1997, 22). However, collective memory can also be manipulated: there is a "politics of remembering" within a culture that shapes its vision of the past. Indeed, we are encouraged to remember some events and forget others.[3] Hirsch and Smith (2002) note that "what a culture remembers and what it chooses to forget are intricately bound up with issues of power and hegemony, and thus with gender" (6).

As ideological constructs, family albums exemplify this politics of memory: they focus on particular events and people, leaving disturbing events in the dark. They fix individuals in social and sexual roles. Looking back at a photographic exhibition, "The Family of Man," organized by the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1955, Marianne Hirsch (1997) shows that the decontextualized display of family pictures across cultures contributed to homogenizing individual and social groups. The exhibition emphasized similarities rather than differences, thus sustaining "a mythology of the family as stable and united, static and monolithic" (51).[4] To resist the reduction to certain gender roles in family albums, a woman's radical strategy may thus consist of deleting images in order to increase their evocative power without revealing the self or making the self too

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[3] For a discussion on the "politization of memory," see Susannah Radstone, Bill Schwarz, eds. *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, Fordham University Press, 2010.

[4] See also "La grande famille des Hommes" in Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, Paris: Seuil, 1957.

personal, thus avoiding an excessive gendering of the self. Annie Ernaux's "impersonal autobiography" *Les Années* (2008), for example, does not contain actual family photographs: the narrator uses ekphrastic description instead. In the process of selecting photographs for a family album, the family produces itself as a family, argues Annette Kuhn in *Family Secrets* (2002). To avoid being limited by personal response to memories emerging from looking at a family album, Kuhn lays out a method for decoding and contextualizing family photographs to reveal their broader cultural and historical meanings (8).

The politics of memory is further complicated by the fact that the memory process is not only a conscious one. The work of the unconscious sorts out events, buries some, and creates screen memories. Freud compares memories to the archaeological objects of Pompei or Tutankhamun's tomb: "All of the essentials are preserved; even things that seem completely forgotten are present somehow and somewhere, and have merely been buried and made inaccessible to the subject" (Freud 1937/1964, 260). Layers of memory may remain inaccessible to us, especially when trauma is involved, and what we "see" may not be necessarily what really happened. In terms of remembering, we're in the same position as archaeologists. Yet, images are thought to be the only way to remember events.

With the contemporary proliferation of images, the current trend is to remember everything. Not only have new media technologies multiplied possibilities of recording the past, but they have also altered temporalities and thus the way we record our lives.[5] Reflecting on new media and autobiography, Philippe Lejeune (2014) states that "new communication tools are not only changing autobiography—the expression of a life—but are also attacking life itself" (249). These tools affect the speed, time frame, and spatial sense of our lives. With social media applications such as Facebook and Instagram, the gap between experiencing and remembering has narrowed. On social media, by sharing a photo, we turn the present into the past more quickly. Online sites have also changed our mnemonic processes. On those sites, we are encouraged to remember the past in words and pictures. It is difficult not to put a photo of oneself on a Facebook profile. Not only do social media influence how we remember, but also what we remember, as memories can be triggered by social media themselves. Facebook is full of automated processes that help people

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[5] For a discussion of the digitization of memories, see José van Dijck, *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age*, Stanford University Press, 2007.

resuscitate memories. There is no need for a subject to remember. Moreover, new media technologies have accentuated the tendency to remember everything, whereas "real" memory cannot function without its Other, forgetfulness. With social media, we are witnessing what Ricœur (2000) would call "an excess of memory" which not only hinders memory-work itself, but can lead to dramatic consequences in the present, such as losing your reputation or your job, as Viktor Mayer-Schönberger argues in his book, *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age* (2009).

New social media also raise the question of the ownership of the cyber-memories we leave on the Internet. According to Gunnþórunn Guðmundsdóttir (2014), "no one really knows who owns or will have access to these traces" (44). She draws attention to the commercial interests that thrive on anything we leave on the Internet. Digital technology, however, has not replaced the traditional life-writing media. Philippe Lejeune (2014) observes that among life-writing forms, correspondence is the one that has been the most affected by high technology, while autobiographies and diaries continue to be written in their traditional forms.

All in all, the association of images and memory has been negative. The fear is that we will be eventually manipulated by images and by the giant companies that profit from them, and that we won't have ownership of our past anymore. With digitization, memories have become more fragile than ever as they are both everywhere and nowhere. Hence, the resistance to images we find in some autobiographies. The same ambivalence can be found as regards to identity.

Identity

The question of self-identity haunts life writing, especially contemporary forms of life writing, for the individualization of modern societies has brought the question of identity to the forefront. Social science has shown that in traditional cultures, identities were conferred by fixed social roles pertaining to gender, birthright, parental status, religious status, and so on. Although gender roles still have a strong influence in determining the sense of who we are, in modern cultures, identities have become increasingly fluid and dynamic. As individuals have freed themselves from the constraints of social roles, identity has become something one may invent, as social scientist, Jean-Claude Kaufmann (2004), argues in his theory on identity, *L'invention de soi* ("Inventing Oneself"). Today, identity is no longer perceived as a given, but as a creative and flexible construct, even

though this "invention" is framed by those models a society makes available. Self-invention is not incompatible with the fact that the identity of an individual reflects his/her society.

Within this context of self-invention, images play a key role. Kaufmann argues that identity can be understood, to some extent, as an image of oneself (2004, 68). Identity, therefore, may be thought of as the product of a representation of oneself. It is images of oneself that form the basis of the construction of one's identity, guiding action and interaction in everyday life. They provide the necessary multiplicity and fluidity to the individual's self-representation. Therefore, images enable the play of identity more easily than stories, according to Kaufmann. This also applies to life writing. Laura Marcus notes that "the relationship between life-writing and photography, and the incidence of photographs (actual or described) in life-writing texts, are at their most prominent in works which possess a particular generic hybridity, or represent identity itself in hybrid terms."[6]

If images open up the expression of identity, they can also restrict it. Visual images, which have multiplied with digital photography, may also fix and constrain identity (Kaufmann 2004, 70). For instance, the portrait which features on official documents is supposed to sum up our identity, even though this photograph is only one among many images and does not reflect the dynamism at the heart of identity. Thus, in her experimental and multicultural memoir, *Dictée* (1982), Korean American writer Theresa Hak Kyung Cha contests the use of photographs as a means of accessing identity, as Marie-Agnès Gay notes in this book. Moreover, images of the past may dramatize the autobiographical subject's sense of a gap between one's own sense of identity in the present and the otherness of what was. Finally, images can also be manipulated more easily than stories, hence the link between ideology and image. Thus, in terms of constructing one's identity, images are ambivalent.

On the one hand, identity images are a reflection of oneself, and as such, they encourage reflexivity and therefore self-knowledge, one of the cognitive conditions of life writing. Looking at an old photograph of oneself can often be the starting point for writing memoirs. But images are also characterized by plurality and changeability so that they lead to a certain fragmentation of the individual subject. This apparent

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[6] Laura Marcus, "'The split of the mirror": Photography, Identity and Memory." Paper presented at the 2018 FAAAM conference on Women's Life Writing in Text and Image (University of Paris Ouest Nanterre).

contradiction disappears if we distinguish between two types of identity as Kaufmann does: ordinary identity (what he calls ICO identity),[7] or biographical identity. For Kaufmann (2004, 169), there are more images than narratives involved in the way ordinary identity works. Images dominate what Kaufmann calls "immediate identity," which is characterized by fluidity, multiplicity, and readiness for action, while "biographical identity," which tends towards unity and coherence, rests on a narrative process, and involves a certain distancing from everyday life. Hence, the concept of "narrative identity," which produces a different type of identity than that produced by images.

Until recently, autobiographical theory focused primarily on text; the construction of the self was considered as independent from visual images and emerging essentially from the stories we tell. This was validated by the fact that several disciplines—philosophy, social science, psychology, and so on—embraced the concept of narrative identity to understand the self as a tissue of stories. These disciplines have identified a cognitive and communicative activity called "autobiographical reasoning" in individuals. This activity creates links between past and present that are essential for an individual's development.[8] When a subject tells about her life in an organized narrative, she acquires a sense of self-continuity as the events of her life are symbolically integrated into a story. The tendency of autobiographical reasoning is to look for a certain unity of the self, through a reconciliation of past and present. Self-narratives are ontological in their everyday forms and tend to posit a stable being across time. Stories also make sense of our relationships with others, as no self is isolated from the rest of the world. These relationships contribute to the creation of an interwoven fabric of ontological stories.

With the rising use of social media in everyday life, a new form of identity has appeared: online identity. If social roles no longer define identities, new communication technologies have given rise to new types of identities. The concept of online identity challenges that of narrative identity. For Rak and Poletti (2014), "Self-representation online challenges the tendency to read for narrative, which has been a hallmark of auto/

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[7] The acronym ICO coined by Kaufmann means "Immediate, Contextualized, Operational" (*Invention de soi*, 172).

[8] Tilmann Habermas and Christin Köber. 2015. "Autobiographical Reasoning is Constitutive for Narrative Identity: The Role of the Life Story for Personal Continuity." In *The Oxford Handbook of Identity Development*, ed. K. McLean and M. Syed, 149–165. New York: Oxford University Press.

biography studies" (7). They point out that some digital activities, such as the posting of photographs, are not narrative at all. The question is whether there is such a thing as a "virtual identity" which would be different from the "real" one. To answer that question, one needs first to consider the different stages of development of the Internet: Web 1.0 and Web 2.0. The second stage, dubbed Web 2.0, is characterized especially by the change from static web pages to dynamic or user-generated content and the growth of social media. This new stage has affected the perspective on the online self. While the scholars of Web 1.0 hailed the birth of the "cyborg," a virtual identity that exists only online and creates its own communities,[9] Web 2.0 theorists, such as social scientist Rob Cover (2016), argue that digital selves epitomize the concept of identity as performance that Judith Butler articulated in *Gender Trouble* (1990). What Butler said about gender identity—"There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the 'very' expressions that are said to be its results" (33)—also applies to online identities. In other words, when we set a profile on Facebook, post photographs and texts, or respond to messages, we are performing acts of self-identity. In the case of transwoman Janet Mock analyzed by Aurelia Mouzet in the first part of this book, these performing acts lead to a visual-virtual-verbal (re)definition of womanhood: "Womanhood 2.0." Online performance, however, is not fundamentally different from performing acts of identity in real life. So that unlike what the first theorists of online identity demonstrated, the gap between real and virtual life may not be absolute.

IMAGE/TEXT AND THE QUESTION OF REFERENTIALITY

The juxtaposition of photographs and autobiography in life writing also returns us to the issue of referentiality, which poststructuralist theories deconstructed in the 1980s. These theories demonstrated that neither text nor image can give us an unmediated access to reality. In studies on autobiography and photography alike, the idea that photography and autobiography merely reproduce or represent reality is considered naïve. Acknowledging the referentiality of a text has even been deemed as tantamount to holding traditional views on language, the self and literary form,

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[9] Turkle, Sherry. 1995. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

as Eakin (1992) argues in his study of reference in autobiography, *Touching the World*. With poststructuralist theories, addressing the issue of reference has become almost taboo. This has had several consequences on autobiographical studies: first, memoirs analyzed by poststructuralism are thought to say more about the present than about the past, as the subject of discourse is in the present; next, autobiography is considered as an art form (or a rhetorical construct) rather than a historical document.

Importantly, one of the key arguments in the poststructuralist deconstruction of referentiality is that the self is staged in photography and text alike. The subject of autobiography is split between the narrating *I* and the narrated *I*, thus inscribing at the origins of the diegesis a multiplicity of selves that heightens the fictionality of the account. Similarly, the subject of the photographic self-portrait can never be identical with himself/herself. Using Lacan's mirror stage in a child's development, Marianne Hirsch (1997, 89) points out that there is an irretrievable gap between the subject represented in the photo and the one looking at it. In the photographic portrait, the subject can only gaze at otherness. For some scholars (Hirsch 1997; Adams 2000), the referential basis of autobiography and photography is but an illusion, masking "their constructed and mediated qualities," as Hirsch puts it. As a result, when text and image occur together, neither can guarantee the veracity of the other. An example of this poststructuralist distrust for personal images can be found in Roland Barthes' autobiography, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975). The work opens with a series of photographs of the author's childhood and youth accompanied by comments. Although Barthes professes a certain fascination for these photographs, which he will explain further in his essay, *Camera Lucida* (1981), images can only form a pre-text; they belong to the body, the Id, something that the subject has to detach himself from to enter writing (*écriture*), which is abstract and signifies without representing. Visuality, even verbal, has to be eliminated from writing to achieve a certain purity. About the "adjective," Barthes writes: "He is troubled by any *image* of himself, suffers when he is named. He finds the perfection of a human relationship in this vacancy of the image: to abolish—in oneself, between oneself and others—adjectives; a relationship which adjectivizes is on the side of the image, on the side of domination, of death" (43). An image is an annihilating otherness for Barthes. The ultimate self-writing is devoid of images. With less extremism than Barthes, the narrator of Marilyn French's third novel, *Her Mother's Daughter* (1987), who is also a photographer, takes issue with the referentiality of the images, which may omit

more than they reveal, or allow for multiple readings—and ultimately depend on words to correct or complete them, as Stephanie Genty argues in this book.

All these arguments represent a radical shift from the first studies on autobiography, which were undertaken by historians. Autobiography was then considered as a subgenre of biography, with the same truth value attached to it. The nature of the referent, however, is different in autobiography and photography. Because of their indexical nature, photographs constitute material traces of the past. There was necessarily a referent for a photograph to be taken. As Barthes points out in *Camera Lucida*, "…in photography I can never deny the thing has been there" (76). While autobiographies may have a loose relation to their referent, this is not possible for photography. In other words, the referent persists in photography. Hence, a troubling raw presence, which Barthes refers to as "*punctum*," while Mitchell (1994) notes that photography has a "mythic status as a kind of materialized memory trace embedded in the context of personal associations and private 'perspectives'" (289). Thus, there is something magic about a photograph, something that cannot only be explained with words. The semiotics of images is opposed to or coexists with a metaphysics of presence, producing what Mitchell (1994) calls a dialectic of exchange and resistance between photography and language (289). Resistance and ambivalence can be witnessed in the works of Roland Barthes himself. *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* has been hailed as anti-autobiography, attacking the myth of the subject and the grand narrative of the self. Yet, in *Camera Lucida*, Barthes also turns to photography as autobiography to find presence. This leads him to define two different ways of perceiving photographs: through "*studium*" or "*punctum.*" While the "*studium*" is coded and traversed by multiple significations, the "*punctum*," whose powerful effect on us is muted, is not. It brings about an emotional response that is beyond words.

Because of their material presence, photographs are sometimes invaluable, unique repositories of the past. As a result, they often feel indispensable when writing the story of one's life. Many creators of autobiographical comics use photography in their stories, as a gesture toward authenticity, Andrew Kunka (2018, 72) notices. In fact, there are multiple ways in which images point toward reality as Jacques Rancière demonstrates in an effort to reconcile modernity and historicity. Rancière (2003, 22–31) makes a distinction between three types of images—the naked image, the ostensive image, and the metaphorical image—encountered in museums

and exhibitions. The naked image is concerned with giving testimony, not making art. Naked images are exemplified by the photos of the Nazi camps taken in 1945 by famous photographers. Next, the ostensive image displays its power as "sheer presence," but this presence is showcased as art. The third category, the metamorphic image, breaks the distinction between artistic and non-artistic images, which allows a critical circulation between the two. For example, an art installation can be transformed into a "theatre for memory," in which the artist collector or archivist critically displays the heterogeneous elements of a common history (33–34). For Rancière, these three types of images are not pure categories: they are all compelled to borrow something from the others. Even the "naked" image can bring about a contemplation filtered by art: the dehumanization process at work in the camps is supported by representations such as Rembrandt's skinned ox (35). Thus, images make more complex rather than simplify the relationship to the referent, producing new systems of visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, language and silence.

Images and Embodiment

In the relationship between the image and its referent, the representation of the body holds a special place in our cultures and continues to be the focus of much critical attention, more particularly in feminist theory. Second-wave feminism aimed at liberating the female body from patriarchal control and violence, an effort that is still under way as the contemporary #Metoo movements attest. In this struggle to resist control, the role of images is central as part of the struggle is staged on a symbolic level. In a patriarchal context, images of women highlight their position as objects, whether they are beautiful objects to be contemplated or sexual ones to be desired. For Teresa de Lauretis, this representation of woman as image is so culturally pervasive that "it necessarily constitutes a starting point for any understanding of sexual difference and its ideological effects in the construction of social subjects, its presence in all forms of subjectivity" (1984, 37–38).

The contemporary emphasis on the materiality of photography has increased the presence of the body and heightened sexual difference in the representation of women as image. Some photography theorists, such as Roland Barthes (1980), came to consider the photographic portrait as a direct emanation of a body. This is a relatively new development as photographs were first considered as the products of an inexpressive and