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Literature and Photography since 1900

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Response Portfolio

Response to the Shloss Copypack (Photography and Literature)

Shloss' relation of Agee discomfort with "social implications of the photographic moment" caused me to reflect on one of the earliest admonitions from my first photo teacher, in short (and paraphrased):

"You have the right to go anywhere, and take pictures of whatever you want to, and if you are stopped by the police or anyone else and questioned, look them in the eye and tell them *'It's ok, I'm taking a photo class.'*"

I never felt comfortable with street photography, at least when human subjects (that I didn't know) were concerned. Whenever I would charge myself with taking pictures of "interesting" or otherwise photographically attractive people I remember skulking around, feeling a giddy self-consciousness, perhaps even guilt. I put this off to "not being in to street photography," but I realize now that it had to do with an unarticulated discomfort with the lack of permission inherent in street photography, especially where a human being is a focal point of the photograph. To clarify, I do not have an ideological problem if an unknown pedestrian wanders in to the frame when I release the shutter...only if they are the unwitting subject of a decisive moment.

The issue of consent is of course a huge issue, and one that every photographer ultimately has to wrestle with as there is no cultural consensus (like so many things!). The words Agee chose to use, that photographs can be either "offered" or "stolen" stuck me as particularly useful for talking about the issue, because of their simplicity.

...

The issues of "Truth," as considered in both Shloss and Dow Adams reveal an interesting left hand path in the direction of discussions whether photographs can be considered to be "true" or "real," namely that Truth as discussed is often a Platonic idea of truth, a fiction of the mind. This is not to take the position that "Nothing is true," but rather to say that questions of truth applied to events as large and long as a life, or as constrained as a photograph or single point of view become amorphous and vague, not to say conditional. Barthes' contention that "the photograph is literally an emanation of the referent" is true, but that truth speaks to nothing outside of the frame, which is defined by the photographer. This, although often lamented, should not be blamed on photography, nor the photographer but rather the recipient of the photograph who refuses to take that into account.

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Photography is a dangerous weapon, as discussed in Sontag, Shloss and Mitchell, in that it is a tool by which a dominant culture can shape the perception of reality of minority cultures that it envelops. However, it is also a democratic weapon, because the individuals in a photographic culture have the ability to take the camera and through their own image making (and perhaps the detournment of mass media) reshape their own perceptions of reality. The frustrating thing of this process, is the now almost instantaneous appropriation and consumption of any contrary movement by the larger image culture, with the simultaneous removal of any clear dissent.

Response to Sontag

"Susan Sontag has written a book of great importance and originality...All future discussion or analysis of the role of photography in the affluent mass-media societies is now bound to begin with her book." -John Berger, taken from the back of the Picador paperback edition

I should probably state at the beginning that I do not like this book very much. I found it full of over-generalizations about large groups of people and broad activities with no evidence offered as support. Susan Sontag takes an activity that is performed by many different kinds of people for many reasons, but manages to vaguely herd them into a few separate categories: the artist-photographer that wishes to consume the world (and wishes to be a painter somehow, perhaps), the insecure tourist who substitutes photographing a clichéd site for experiencing a new environment, the bourgeois sentimentalist that vainly wishes to preserve an event.

Her tone is harsh, and she seems to write to condescend rather than to enlighten, instruct or opine. Indeed, midway through "The Heroism of Vision" I had begun to seriously question what photography Sontag likes, or at least respects. I still don't really have a good feeling about it...it almost made me wonder if *On Photography* was an attempted intellectual assassination of Photography itself, her brush of disapproval so broad, and her strokes so sweeping.

What I found so astonishing for so well regarded a book is the author's tendency to make assertions rather than statements supported with evidence. There are so many examples of this that it is difficult to choose one, but I will for the sake of illustration:

"Astute observers noticed that there was something naked about the truth a photograph conveyed, even when it's maker did not mean to pry. In *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) Hawthorne has the young photographer, Holgrave, remark about the daguerreotype portrait that "while we give it credit only for depicting the merest surface, it actually brings out the secret character with a truth that no painter would ever venture upon, even could he detect it.""

I mention this one because there is some support offered to her statement... in this case from a fictional character in a Hawthorne novel. I would not necessarily have a problem with that if she explored this line of thinking any more, but she doesn't. It drops there, and is never heard of again. Besides the fact that some readers might take the idea briefly expressed as "kookishness" (after all, what "secret character" is Holgrave—and Sontag—getting at?), such a statement might be instantly contradicted in the mind of someone who has even a cursory familiarity with the syntax of early photographic process. For example, the "secret character" might be summoned by means of the prolonged periods a subject had to keep still in order to produce a clear photograph.

I am not of the opinion that this collection of essays is entirely without merit. There were a number of places where I felt the author made good observations or conveyed interesting theoretical ideas about photography. There were just too many paragraphs that left me scratching my head wondering where what I had just read had come from.

Response to Gardner

The introduction for the “Gardner’s Photographic Sketchbook of the Civil War” informs the reader, roughly 140 years later, that the (presumed) author of the text was a man under contract with the Federal Government during the American Civil War, in order to document it photographically. E.F. Bleiler makes brief mention of the text as “partisan,” to inform the reader, albeit somewhat gently perhaps, that the text is not objective reportage but rather a view of history with a specific agenda. Of course, if the text is laden with an specific view of history (to the author current events) so are the photographs.

In this sense, this book is interesting as an early example (is it the earliest?) of photography and its use as a tool of propaganda and social control. The enemy is shown captured or dead (not displayed funereally but rotting and swollen where they fell) if shown at all, while the “we” of the text is shown at leisure, well groomed, and--most importantly--alive.

It is appropriate that this early example of photographic propaganda contains also early examples of staged shots. Plate 41, “The Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter” depicts a confederate soldier lying supposedly where he fell in a crevice between two rocks. While the dead man is unidentified in the text, he was later discovered to be “18-year-old Pvt. Andrew Hoge.” Hoge’s corpse exists in other plates depicting dead confederate soldiers, taken at other spots, lying in different positions. While it is true that this is not an example of the worst of staged or faked documentary evidence, it is interesting that from the beginning documentary photography not only had an agenda, but also photographers willing to sacrifice veracity for a compelling image.

The text of the book was difficult to enjoy and process, given that it hung so heavily on events and people that I admittedly know little about. The now quaint earnest style is alienating to my ear, and it built upon the mistrust I already felt for the author from the introduction.

Photographically, the book is interesting given that the photographers had almost no body of work to draw from. Of course, many decisions are informed by the technical syntaxes of wet plate photography and primitive cameras (no stopping motion, no close ups, &c.), but still the painterly composition style seems apparent to me. What was almost comical as I read were the number of far away shots of buildings that were (according to the text) ruins, but that in the photograph looked fine. When I looked closely, perhaps I could see some damage, but in general it was difficult to see what the author was talking about.

The information about the staging of plate 41 taken in part from:
Paul Martin Lester, Photojournalism An Ethical Approach, Chapter 6.
<http://commfaculty.fullerton.edu/lester/writings/chapter6.html>

Response to Riis

To pitch in on the discussion of ethnic stereotypes and identity in Riis' work, I thought it was interesting to see European prejudices overlaid the New York landscape; although Riis learned much in New York, he clearly was not infected with anti-African racism. Of course, he had plenty of Dutch and Protestant bigotries to keep the fires of his heart stoked, so no worries there. I think it is important to note that Riis refuses to consign any of these parties, Christian and heathen alike, to the tenements. Inasmuch as he comes across as a terribly intolerant man, he at least is willing to overlook his prejudices and posit that the peoples he described were being wronged by means of an unjust economic system which exploits their inability to escape their current situations (and reinforced the same). I think this is where Riis is redeemed, and remains relevant to the modern reader.

What I find interesting about his use of photographs is how they play into his strategy of persuasion. Riis employs a blend of stereotype (or synecdoche, as Bernadette pointed out), anecdote and statistic to make his case, which is what made the book, I'm sure, in the end so convincing and so able to reach a wide audience. The statistics are important, but they can only tell so much of the story...Riis, a moralist, clearly wanted a visceral reaction from his audience. Personally, I was most moved by the stories of the tenement fires...but I'm sure the pictures helped readers picture the squalor he was attempting to make them hate. I find myself wondering how much of the reaction he was after was dampened by the use of illustrations where "limits in technology prevented some of [Riis'] photographs from being reproduced accurately." (from A Note on the Text.)

My only critical concern with the text is in the amorphous (and with photojournalism sometimes contiguous) areas of permission and charity. Riis is obviously concerned about the plight of the poor in New York, and I believe genuinely wanted to help them and make a positive change in society. Still, his use of photography in the book begs questions about the dignity and rights of the people being portrayed. In the end, he is a relatively privileged individual pointing fingers into the slums telling the moneyed classes how things should be in there...and when changes were made, I'm willing to bet the residents of the tenement districts had little to no input on what happened to the little slice of the world that they considered home.

Response to Agee and Evans

I'd like to start off by responding to Will's questioning "...whether or not [Agee's prose] ultimately detracts from the purpose of the book as a whole narrative: in my opinion it ultimately did. It seems that he attempted to circumvent his own discomfort with his "spy assignment" by adopting a style that fluctuates between poetic journalism and stream-of-consciousness mysticism. While this is not necessarily a bad thing, at times he tends to get bogged down under the weight of his own lofty language, and occasionally veers into an absurd territory where he raises the tenant farmers and their wretched living conditions on a pedestal so high that it is difficult to believe that he took his own writing completely seriously. I'm thinking specifically about the four page near-heroic paean to the physical structure of the Gudger House that begins building on page 121 and ends on 129 (it starts off well, but he seems to get more and more excited as he goes, and it became pretty hard to take around 124-125).

I think that passage is an extreme example of how the style he chose ultimately detracted from the book's effectiveness. For instance, there are so many meandering passages that the book is difficult to wade through at times, especially if the reader is attempting to fish out a journalistic or factual account of the tenant farmers. Additionally, his endless praise of the beauty of the tenants often feels overwrought and not entirely sincere...during the aforementioned pages regarding the Gudger house, I wondered several times if Agee would ever think to read those words to the Gudgers...I imagine that they would be embarrassed and angered, and would believe Agee to be making fun of them. This is of course my opinion, but it's drawn from a quote by Annie Mae "Oh I do *hate* this house *so bad!* Seems like they ain't nothing in the whole world I can do to make it pretty."

Regarding the question of how Evans' photographs compare with Agee's prose, I found the parallel structures of the presentation to be interesting, but I think what is clear is that neither tells the objective truth; both authors rearrange reality to suit their own aesthetics. It is much less obvious with Evans (after all, how could we reasonably know that he rearranged furniture, or how he chose which photographs, etc.), but Agee nearly confesses that he has altered reality with the very structure and style of his writing. After all, the book uses few direct quotes mostly consists of relation of the story from Agee himself, with copious asides of how he is writing from memory later or had neglected to take notes, etc. A photographer, especially one who doesn't include captions, does not have the luxury of that level of honesty. It is difficult to say how close either of them comes to reality, but my guess would be that both of them could probably be roughly described as "so close, but so far away."

Response to Weegee

What is striking about Weegee is the great sense of entitlement he has in his photographing the city of New York. It seems to have never occurred to him that he might not have the right to photograph whatever struck his eye. I think it's here that the conceit of the news reporter is visible: that because the reporter is charged with collecting facts by society (or more realistically, by the newspaper they work for), Weegee (and countless others) collected the "facts" that caught his eye, whether they had "newsworthiness" or not. It seems as though he truly believed (that is to say never considered) that he had the absolute right to take whatever photograph he wanted, regardless of the subject.

Of course, Weegee worked by the picture, and had a much larger group of publishing interests that he could consider selling his work to, so maybe I should be a little more lenient about his snooping into the private business (sometimes too private! (p102)) of his neighbors than I would be with other photographers. Also, I believe that his affection for his fellow Net Yorkers was genuine, if not pushed a little hard at some points of the book. ("Pleasant sleep...darling." (p29.)). And of course, Weegee never does seem to connect the "curious ones" (chapter 2) with himself...

Affections aside, the cultural biases of Weegee are fairly transparent. While he aligns himself with the 'good' people and advocates tolerance (or at least condemns intolerance (Chapter 13 Harlem)) towards ethnic minorities, on the other hand transvestites and transsexuals being rounded up by the cops (p174-5) is a routine matter that creates some memorable pictures, and "Ethel Queen of the Bowery"—an alcoholic who is also clearly an abused woman (p143)—is a figure of fun. This is not to condemn Weegee, only to point out a few of his biases—which probably affected his life's work both in what pictures he took—and didn't take.

I really enjoyed reading Weegee's advice for aspiring photographers (it really rekindled my desired to get a speed graphic), but in general I think the writing in this book is a good argument for photographers to collaborate with writers on books. I think the clumsiness of his voice made me second-guess the sureness of his camera on a few occasions, which I tried to fight against. Weegee was clearly an expert in his genre of photography.

Response to Taylor

I think the problem with evaluating Taylor's argument that captions and social context can change the meaning of a photograph in relation to the Holocaust is that in our social context the Holocaust is an event that exists on the same plane as the Original Sin, or the Fall of Lucifer. It is mythic, dark and constantly shifting...the birthplace of countless metaphors, crimes and stories.

Maybe that was overly dramatic, but the point is that I think that the holocaust is an event that people of our time and place can not be objective about, which makes it hard to see how a different social milieu and caption could change the meaning of the Holocaust.

The most important component in attempting to test this is to consider which photographs would be seen (and therefore captioned) in another time, in another context. Would the piles of skeletal corpses, in seemingly miles of pits be shown? Or would a vaguely sinister portrait of Hitler and the Third Reich ministers be shown with a detached paragraph reading something like "responsible for untold deaths during one of the worst periods of genocide in the 20th Century" with further diminishing text relating to the harsh economic and social conditions that led to the rise of the Third Reich in the first place (a "'civil' presentation" (Taylor, 195))? It is hard to imagine, I think, but then I was taught that the Manifest Destiny period in the USA was essentially a "bumpy road" that unfortunately displaced a lot of 'Indians' that died somehow, later after the trail of tears. The real lesson probably could have been summed up "you can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs." I know it's not a one-to-one analogy (especially since I've never even seen a visual representation of the genocide of Native Americans), but I think that while it's true that while every photograph may not be capable of being altered completely by changing a caption, that part of the ability to "change the caption" is the ability to obscure the photograph.*

Of course, this matters more when we are talking about current journalism, and is why it's such a central matter to Taylor. The essential issue, in my mind, is that information is not free, as the press industry would have us believe, but rather tightly controlled by a relatively small group of people (editors, journalists) who act in the interests of a very small number of people (the media lords--Rupert Murdoch, Ted Turner, et.al.), rather than in the interest of a public's "right to know." Indeed, as Taylor asserts at the close of *The Body Vanishes* "there is little point in accusing photography of failing to represent the reality of war as if its publication were unmediated" (p 188)...the news is manufactured for the public, and the industry decides for the public what is important for them to know, thus no third party Presidential candidate is ever given serious consideration (let alone air time!) by the press, exposes which could diminish ad dollars are left to languish, and body counts in Afghanistan (especially of civilians) go largely unreported... which brings to mind Sontag's meditation on the difference between the Korean and Vietnam wars as far as photojournalism is concerned. "The public did not see [photographs of the horror of the Korean conflict] because there was, ideologically, no space for them." (On Photography, p18) This is the unanswered question of Taylor, and the most crucial.

*Of course, there's always Bataille's exotic/erotic torture photos (Taylor 30-34), but I think that's indicative of a completely different meaning-changing altogether. :-)

Response to Barthes

The framework of *studium/punctum* struck me as an excellent way to talk about a photograph, a model to investigate what makes a specific image work (or not). Responding to Kelly, I think it is necessarily arbitrary because there can be no formulaic method of evaluating a photograph, save analysis of focus, exposure and tonal values. Given that it is a rare photograph that can be only discussed in those terms, the *studium/punctum* framework allows for a structured subjective analysis of a particular work.

I think that he is an excellent person to put forth the idea of the *studium/punctum* given that the *punctum* for him seems often to be so odd...thus the subjective nature of the framework is revealed and not possible to represent as objective. I guess it's here that I should point out that I consider many of his comments about individual plates skeptically, for example the Hine photo (Barthes, 50.). I find it hard to believe that he can completely view this photograph "naturally" (that is without knowledge or culture as he says it) and be drawn only to the huge collar and finger bandage.

His assertions regarding photography's *noeme* (meaning "smallest unit of meaning"? I couldn't find a good definition) as "That-has-been" is interesting and speaks to photography's special case in the study of imagery—that what is in the picture by definition existed. Unfortunately, this is only partially true (especially in the digital age), and his example of the Avedon photo of William Casby (born a slave) as certification that slavery existed is ridiculous (Barthes, 79). At best, the photo is a single document of a larger volume of work documenting American chattel slavery, but alone it is nothing but a portrait of an elderly black man, shot close with an ambiguous portrait. What we know of the details comes from history and deduction, not the photograph.

I also enjoyed Wexler's use of the Greek word *ekphrasis* (and the invention of *anekphrasis*) as words for discussing the reading of a photograph. I found her notion that *anekphrasis* is an "institutionalized form of sexism and racism" (Wexler, 251) to be taking things to a point short of ideological extremism (where almost anything can be linked to direct oppression), with the exception of an agreement in spirit that a poverty of critical thinking in the western world is not an accident, and that many factors (of which a general tendency towards *anekphrasis* is only one) contribute to the continuity of the status quo.

However, as far as photographs and memory are concerned, we are our memories, that is to say we are the total of what is in our heads (each of us individually—have I ventured into banality yet?). If this is true, and a photograph can be considered a mnemonic device—an artifact that causes or helps us to remember—then it is small wonder that people use these mirrors with memory (Wexler, 256) as devices of not only remembrance but also of reinvention, whereby a present that is not perfect or even painful can be smoothed over somehow by images of bliss or near perfection.

Response to Hirsch

First and foremost, I had a problem with the term “postmemory.” What postmemory is and isn’t exactly is never defined well (it is differentiated from memory “by generational difference and from history by deep personal connection” (Hirsch, 22) and fails to offer a discrete enough mental process to qualify for a single word. Perhaps the post-internet world has filled me with one too many meaningless concatenated super-words and I am letting cynicism rule the day, but Hirsch even says herself that she has doubts about using the term (Hirsch, op. cit.), and I am of the opinion that postmemory is a shorthand construction that fails to reflect its own meaning through its combination of the two words. While I find the subject of the term fascinating, I think that it is semantically dangerous, especially given its similarity in tone and contexts to “postmodern” and easy to misuse. It would simply be safer to not look for a buzzword, and to write about “intergenerational memories and experience” in the appropriate contexts.

Okay, down off the soapbox.

I got off to a bad start with this book, first with the “postmemory” issue, and then with her (in my mind often unfair) criticisms of *Maus*. I admit that *Maus* is one of my favorite books both as holocaust literature and also as a comic book, just so my biases are on the table. I’m afraid that she falls into the trap of over-genderizing the work, especially her feminist reading of the voice of Anja, the mother and the role of the two other women (Mala and Francoise) as media. Anja has no voice in the book, because she is absent; she is dead and her writings are burned. Mala and Francoise are not important to the story because the work is about Vladek’s life and death, and how it affects Art. As a side note, I believe that “Mala” is the actual name of Vladek’s second wife and not a literary pun intended to “emphasize her position as foil to the idealized Anja and...evil stepmother.” It’s too bad, because while I don’t think her subtle condemnation of the lack of feminine voices in the text added much to the work (even for those who would agree with her reading), her other observations were extremely interesting. I had never considered how the three photographs work in conjunction with each other (although only one is in the work...the photograph of Vladek) and the building of the Orphic analogy was not unreasonable either.

Response to Citron

I found the book more intriguing in its non-linear structure (although more than once I wasn't sure how old she was "now" in the text), and in its varied approach to autobiography through the different voices of fiction and non-fiction, which were all (allegedly) "truthful" if not "true." (Citron, 76. Quote attributed to Charlotte Delbo) What's interesting about a work like this however, is that at the end I wonder which I am more doubtful of: this or a straight memoir or autobiography. So much is presented as dialogue--particularly in *Autobiography*—that she makes no claim of recording, so much is at least partially fictionalized, that with the veracity of the work the essential point of the work also feels somewhat lost.

This brings me to my deepest concern about the work, is its (implied) assertion of the validity of repressed and recovered memories. I am certainly not taking issue with Citron's allegations of abuse against her grandfather, but with her narrative of suppressed memories which is sometimes referred to as "regressionism." I've read things here and there which called repressed memories into question, so I asked Bruce Rind, a faculty member in the psychology department, and he told me (paraphrased) that repressed memories are not taken seriously in the field of psychology, that there is no demonstration of a repression mechanism empirically, and that the idea of the "repressed memory" was popularized by Freud, but that it is essentially a "Scientific demonology," wherein the victim is possessed not by evil demons that control their life, but rather evil memories (which paradoxically can not be remembered, except through expensive therapy often involving being put into suggestive states.). This is of course a single expert's response, but the literature published on the American Psychology Association's and the American Psychiatric Association's websites seem to concur with him.

To be clear, I am not saying I don't believe the memory, I'm saying I don't believe it was repressed. Indeed, I wonder if the way her story is presented (we know at all times, even when she didn't that she was raped by her grandfather) isn't a subtle admission of the memories presence throughout her life (a big question of the repressed memory scenario is—if you can't remember it, can't access it, how does it affect you so strongly?). There is a degree to which I feel terrible even talking about it, I feel like I'm attacking Citron, but I do wonder if the repressed memory is a way of telling, an alibi for the victim's failure to come forward earlier, before they ready. Citron remembered after the death of her Grandmother AND Grandfather (her beloved Nana and her abuser), during her initial stage of asthma (Citron, 93-4), which takes place in the 80's, 10 years after she first starts working with rape and incest motifs (to my knowledge, in *Daughter Rite* (1976)).

Well, obviously, I can't prove anything, and I don't want to belabor the point...only to say that I think that undisclosed is probably a better term for the repressed memory of childhood abuse and other unspeakable traumas.

I loved the "elephant in the living room" metaphor.

Response to Auster

Auster's use of the photograph as index of the past and mnemonic device is intriguing, especially the altered family portrait presented on page 4. Here we see the past as edited after family crisis...the father, murdered by the mother is also removed from the family prior to his death (presumably by the mother) by being excised from the family photograph. This comments powerfully (perhaps more piercingly than any other work we've read) on the power our culture gives to photographs: not only do we trust our memory to them (sometimes even subordinating our memories in favor of them) but we use them as a magic, a voodoo doll to excise the past of suffering and unpleasantness.

However powerful a totem the photograph is, I am reminded of the notion that without a caption, a note scrawled on the back or some other form of context, the photograph is an index that has been ripped from its text—mostly meaningless. Auster's "bag of loose pictures" (Auster, 31) is of no help in locating his father, because his father is not in the pictures...not in the way Auster is looking for him anyway. Auster's memory is not the memory of dates and who attended what party, but I guess an existential memory (although I've never been good at philosophical jargon), which photographs cannot hold...they are "ordinary objects" divorced from what Barthes called "the impossible science of the unique being." (Barthes, 71)

It was interesting to see Barthes' noeme of photography make a sort of appearance as capstones to the "Book of Memory" section..."It was. It will never be again. Remember" (Auster 75 & 172) is a bit more somber and poetic than "That-has-been" (Barthes, 77), but a rhyme of meanings is there. Of course, Barthes also connects here with the Portrait of Lewis Payne: "He is dead and he is going to die."

Outside of photography, I enjoyed Auster's detour meditation on the power of words, their magical interconnection through rhyme, palindrome and other so-called "schoolboy" games (Auster 160). It evoked my own memory of being younger, and reading in Hermann Hesse's Siddhartha "the way to Atman is through the breath" (or something, that's a paraphrase) and realizing that the German word for breath (Atem, atmen is the verb) is related to Atman (the hindu word for self, it can also mean "breath"). I was so sure I had discovered something so salient, but I wasn't sure what it was. It seemed so magical and significant at the time...but I think it was just a sense of historical disorientation. So cynical!

I found this book to be very moving. The punctum of the book for me was the death of the grandfather/magician. So sad and sweet.

I thought it was strange that a bridge between Citron and Auster is Pinocchio. Would Auster say that these books "rhyme" in this way? So strange!