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POETRY, FLATTERY & PLAIN MISCONCEPTION

AN INQUIRY INTO THE MORALITY OF REPRESENTATION



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ABSTRACT

This thesegesis aims to tackle that moment of hesitation that causes me to miss my shot, in the hope of making me as a practitioner more ‘introspectively aware’.

It explores the possibility of photographic representation generating its own moral questions, and the plausability of these questions ever being answered. It traverses the very nature of perception, and delves right down to the ontological roots of the medium.

It is about surprises, and intuitions.

I do declare—

Except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is all mine; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesegesis is the result of the work which has been carried out since the official research program; and any editorial work, paid or unpaid carried out by a third party is acknowledged.

I feel safe under Pauline's supervision, and I wonder how I will get through life without it next year. I appreciate Adrian and Linda, and all the kids in my honours year, for knowing when to take my bullshit and when to dish it back.

Seren, for just being there all the time, and my friends and family for all the things that friends and family do. My insane housemates, for keeping things interesting. Nick, for being patient and making my project beautiful. RMIT security, who never ask questions.

And of course all of my beautiful subjects, without whom I would simply be a creepy moustachio'd man toting a huge camera.

Seriously, thanks.

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“People tend to feel the dilemma of rigour or relevance with particular intensity when they reach the age of about 45. At this point, they ask themselves, ‘Am I going to continue to do the thing I was trained for, on which I base my claims to technical rigor and academic respectability? Or am I going to work on the problems --ill-formed, vague, and messy-- that I have discovered to be real around here?’ And depending on how people make this choice, their lives unfold differently.”

(Donald Schön, 28)

PREAMBLE

**FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE READER
WHO REMAINS UNFAMILIAR WITH MY WORK**

I
MY PASSION

The Book of Kings reports that it took seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines to please Solomon (Kings, 11:3). Similarly I maintain that many, if not most photographers are polyamorous. In theory I am open to the possibility of finding ‘true love’. On the other hand, I admit to being more than a little skeptical as to whether there will ever be a time when all my needs are satisfied by just one camera. There are just so many different qualities to look for, and no system can offer them all.

Just when I think I have settled down, the honeymoon period ends. It might happen anywhere, when I’m out in public with my digital SLR and it’s all peaches and cream—then suddenly, mid-composition maybe, I find myself slack-jawed and drooling over a dark and exotic body nestled in another man’s arms. In those moments of overpowering lust I spurn the touch of whatever dull object I might be handling at the time. In the roaring blaze of my envy the painful thought of my fingers meekly wrapped around the worn-out old grip of my oh-so-spectacularly-mundane workhouse SLR freezes them to the marrow. In my covetousness

for the whisper of a well-tuned rangefinder the loud tattoo of my mirror flipping up and about like an orca beached in a marimba shop rings like tinnitus, a constant reminder of an annoyance which will never truly let up.

I am a fiend. At a given moment I might be sporting two, maybe three bodies in my bag. At home, a harem awaits me, with samples spanning all formats from digital to glass plate. I flaunt them like trophies. When friends visit, I encourage them to touch, to play, to discover for themselves what smooth operation feels like in their hands. Naturally, many are only for show—perhaps there was a time when it pleased me to take them down off the shelf and play around, but they have long since served their purpose and crossed into the hopelessly deep trench of obsolescence.

For many, photography is a pleasure. For me, it is a necessity, an insatiable urge, to be pursued tenaciously and with vigour. A camera is at once a beautiful and ingenious apparatus worthy of praise and worship, and at the same time an appliance, an object, an implement to be thrown around and abused as I see fit. Photography is to me at once an inimitable pleasure and an inconsequential means to an end.

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I shoot portraits. I try to convey in them a strong mood or else impression of character in my work. This character does not necessarily need to bear any semblance to a person's 'true' character, although more often than not it does. I assign high aesthetic value to my images as image-objects—the texture and photographic craft must be beautiful, and the subject-matter will then follow. In a sense, you could say that I don't care about my subjects—I size them up and scrutinise them according to their merit as 'interesting faces'. Do not misunderstand me, I take great pleasure in good company—but photographically I could not care less whether they prefer Karl Marx or E.L. James—so long as their gaze can hold mine I am happy.

The undergraduate portfolio I produced last year consisted in of five volumes of photographs unaccompanied by text: three roughly defined by the context of their capture, one liberally characterised by subject matter, and one which functioned as a sort of a grand compendium of faces that have crossed my path. Of these, the fifth book most accurately reflects my practical methodology, as the four others (despite what might, ultimately, have grouped them together) were in truth just as arbitrarily executed at the point of capture. These portraits were selected from a catalogue of roughly sixty thousand images (approximately one tenth portraits), the culmination of all I had captured over a three year

Bachelor of Arts, in six countries, over three different photographic formats.

It would be appropriate to describe my work as ‘spontaneous’ (as opposed to, perhaps, ‘candid’), since I don’t really plan photographs, I just carry around a camera and wait for an opportunity to present itself to me. I almost always make use of ambient light, although occasionally I find it necessary to lift a chin or turn a face in order to direct people into an optimal position. I shoot first for the joy of shooting, and later arrange things into projects. Not one image of the two hundred and thirty-six that ended up in any of the books was shot with a project ‘in mind’, but rather each frame was intuitively executed on a ‘shoot first ask questions later’ basis. Later, browsing through my catalogue at the editing stage, I try to make communicable sense of my hunches, grouping them appropriately and transforming them into ‘projects’. This is the way I work.

II MY WORK

I do not maintain that there is anything groundbreaking in my practice. August Sander produced work along the same lines throughout the early twentieth century with

his magnum opus, *Menschen Des 20. Jahrhunderts* ("The 20th Century Man"). Described by *The Economist* as a "systematic attempt to portray and typologize his fellow countrymen" (n.p.), the work bears much semblance to mine, being a huge collection of large format portraits depicting the people that Sander had crossed paths with in his meanderings.

Sander's concern was the epitomisation and taxonomisation of a broad cross-section of society: in short to produce a physiognomic catalogue of Weimar Germany. This provides rationale for categorisation of his subject-matter into 'types' of people, and also justify the publication of the work. He saw himself as "speak[ing] the truth in all honesty about [his] age" (Sander in *The Economist*). Reinhold Misselbeck writes, "Although his selection of people was mainly influenced by personal meetings and was thus hardly representative in a demographic sense, his portraits remain highly accurate reflections of their time" (n.p.). By 1944 Sander had produced over forty thousand negatives, many of which were lost when his studio was destroyed by bombing (Misselbeck).

Richard Avedon's *In The American West* is another exceedingly eminent body of large format portraits which probably does everything my work could hope to do and more. However, as striking as each image is in its own right Avedon has still unified them under a title which

suggests that they are portraits of ‘a type’, another physiognomic taxonomy. Max Kozloff writes of Avedon that “The photographer thinks that you ultimately get to know people in pictures, as if there is some arcane, yet clinching knowledge to be gleaned from the image” (n.p.), again arises this concept that a photograph ‘speaks’ a transcendent ‘truth’.

But how can a photograph be said to be ‘speaking a truth’ about anything? There are so many unseen forces in play here. Of course, it is impossible to deny outright that there is some ‘truth spoken’ in the image, as Sander suggests. But my own work stakes no claims to being an objective and archival portrayal of my sociohistorical milieu, nor does it purport to hold in store any grand revelations concerning society, or humankind. Throughout the course of this year I have come to understand that my portraits are simply records of faces, existing for the mere sake of the natural curiosity the face draws. I do not deny that much of the value I see in my own work stems from my interest in the sense of character I see in my subjects, perhaps in essence the ‘truth’ the photographs ‘speak’ to me. But, over the course of this year, I have learned that this truth is spoken only to me. I do not stake the claim that from my work the viewer can gain indexical insight into a ‘type’ of people, that they can learn from it, or enrich their understanding of the world through having been exposed to it.

Instead the untitled sample of my work included in this package is intended to give the reader some impression of the way that I consolidate the ideas explored in this text with my praxis. The prints remain loose, unnumbered, in the hope that the impressions imposed upon the viewer by the order of their presentation may be varied or randomised as the prints are jumbled up. I encourage the viewer to take from these prints what they will.

III

MY METHOD

I have turned lately to shooting almost exclusively on sheet-film, an expensive and cumbersome undertaking to put it lightly. The project packaged up with this volume was shot exclusively on a 4x5 view camera, which demands a workflow quite contrary to my usual practice. It is easy to venture outside with your SLR slung gaily over your shoulder and a skip in your step: not so with the monorail mammoth. A bare minimum kit must include the camera, a reasonably solid tripod, a dark-cloth, shutter-release cable, a lightmeter, a loupe, and of course as many film holders as you are willing to carry (two sheets of film in each). Each shot takes minutes to set up and requires tray processing. If the old shed positioned down the back of

my property was instead built on the grounds of a high-security correctional facility I have no doubt it would be colloquially referred to by the inmates as ‘the can’, or ‘the hole’ or ‘room 101’, but being positioned such that it is simply call it ‘my darkroom’. It is invariably freezing in the wintertime and sweltering in the summer, making it difficult to maintain temperatures useful for anything other than psychological torture.

Being an eccentric dresser, people tend to size me up and write off my camera either as the accessory of an overly committed dandy, or else an eager hobbyist. They ask me if it works and then, when I reply in the affirmative, why I use it. Of course, I just tell them I enjoy using it—and naturally I do. However it would be short-sighted to write off the practice merely as a film purist’s leisure. I do not even consider myself a film purist. Film purists trawl forums and pounce upon unwitting supporters of keeping a digital option. Since I scan, really I am still making use of a digital workflow.

Often to avoid a lengthy conversation I just tell people that shooting on sheet film ‘is like shooting with a hundred megapixel camera’ and leave it at that. Alain Briot writes on the Luminous Landscape blog of an interview where he gave essentially this same answer (n.p.). As the interview progresses, however, he reflects further:

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“I found myself under the dark-cloth composing an image on the ground glass of my Linhof field camera. In this intimate setting, shielded from prying eyes by the black cloth, I thought of another, more honest answer: I use a 4x5 view camera because I have tried all the other available formats and found none to be as satisfying as 4x5. In other words I attempted to avoid using 4x5 but was forced to accept that only 4x5 would allow me to create the kind of images I wanted to create.”

I find this answer to be more in keeping with my own line of thought. The ‘kind of images I want to create’ are made possible by the social and technical advantages offered by large format photography. The former shall be discussed later in this volume, but it seems appropriate to explain the latter of these here.

To those that seem interested I will condescend to explain at length the possibilities that camera movements introduce. These movements are the major advantage that the view camera offers to me, unattainable on any other format. When I take portraits on a large format camera I am able to make use of tilt and swing in the lens plane, allowing for extensive manipulation of my depth of field.

Generally speaking I like to keep both eyes sharp, and let the rest of the face quickly fall off. When working with a narrow depth of field, the plane of focus will remain parallel to the lens plane. When using a camera

with no movements such as my digital SLR, the lens, image and focal planes remain parallel. This means, if I am photographing a face front-on with a wide aperture I might have a one centimetre depth-of-field around the eyes. If I am using a tilt-shift lens I can ‘tilt’ my lens plane forward or backward in order to alter my plane of focus and, for example, keep the nose, ears and eyes sharp while letting the chin and hairline fall off.

As soon as the face begins to turn to profile however, I can only keep one eye sharp without stopping down in order to expand my depth-of-field. When using a monorail camera with full movements on the front standard I am able to ‘swing’ my plane of focus around to sit on a parallel plane with both eyes. The size of my image (and viewfinder) is approximately thirteen times larger than that of a digital SLR, allowing for much finer control over focus discernible by eye. In this way I maintain full control over my depth-of-field in a way I cannot do on any digital camera within a viable price range.

This control which I exercise over depth-of-field is of course dependent upon the laws of optical physics, and in that sense is a faithful mode of reproduction. On the other hand, the manifestation of this particular aspect of optical theory is not something naturally familiar to the human eye. So, despite the fact that the reproduction might be technically faithful to what was there, it may

still be seen as a manipulation or artistic distortion. It may be described as indexically faithful, but axiomatically photographic. To understand the way that it is faithful one must be photographically literate. Again, I move ahead of myself—I will dwell at length on perception and veracity in later chapters.

There are of course the advantages and disadvantages of working with film, too numerous and petty to list here, but worth noting is the final pleasure offered to me by this unique camera system: the pace it imposes upon my workflow. I rarely expose more than a single frame, and the consideration and work each portrait requires really helps me to develop a useful distance in my mind between my subject and my image.

An SLR, held up to my eye, is an extension of my body; it moves with me, breathes with me, it sees what I see, understands me as intuitively as I understand it. When the mirror flips up I miss the moment, but my SLR sees it for me, and my experience is just as rich. Working with an SLR is like playing with a friend you grew up with, intuitive and laid back it is easy to take it for granted. Working with the view camera on the other hand is like spending time with a grandparent—you love it just as dearly, but differently, and you spend your time differently. Since it is so difficult to move its three stiff legs it will not venture out but prefers to see things from

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its current vantage point. Its perspective is... obstinate. For it to understand what you are seeing you must explain it, with love and tender patience. If you are too hasty it will be nothing but a hindrance, and it will get you nowhere. On the other hand, if you know how to speak to it, like any loving grandparent, it will spoil you rotten.

CHAPTER ONE

+

HESITATION

I
A SURPRISE

Midway through the final year of photography school, before my portfolio was taking shape and I was only just beginning to experiment with large format photography, I shot a man's portrait. At the end of the day I hung my creation to dry and I saw that it was good. It just so happened that the Moran Photographic Prize deadline was that night, so I tried my luck and entered the portrait with a smugly evocative quasi-poetic title that contextualised him as a sort of 'everyday hero' character. Feeling good about the image, and positive that he (let us call him Dr. J) would be pleased, the next day I brought him a print. Despite my confidences, bolstered by enthusiastic praise from his colleagues and even his own son, the print was met with intense opprobrium on the part of the subject himself. In fact, so firmly was he inclined in his sentiment that he asked that I should refrain from circulating the image. Initial disparagement aside, my dilemma was exacerbated as I received word that the image had been shortlisted, and was up in the draw for a fifty-thousand dollar prize.

What does one do in a situation like this? At the time I had really been surprised that he had not liked the image: looking into his eyes I was enchanted by his quiet poetry, consoled by his calm aura and captivated by his wise and

learned gaze. Looking back however, I will concede that the physical likeness was not the most flattering. The wise and learned gaze accentuates the furrow in his brow, the droop in his eyelids and the wilt in his mouth. The calm aura no doubt is an illusion generated by the shining halo emanating off his bald pate. It is, unequivocally, a portrait of an old man.

All the same I think (from the comfortable vantage point of youth) that if I were an old man I would no doubt understand myself to be an old man. I would play up to it, have fun with it. Perhaps geriatric disfigurement of the body is in itself unsightly, but I do not think that the overall picture need be 'ugly'. I still maintain that everything which Dr. J's portrait says of him, aside from the fact that his body has grown old, is by and large positive.

However, if somebody is kind enough to endure the inconvenience of sitting for me I can hardly justify distributing portraits of them which say things they don't want said. And yet if, as is evident in the case of Dr. J, I can so wildly misconstrue or else ignore the agendas of my sitters how can I even go about approaching subjects in the hope of photographing them?

The surprise described above hit me last year during the final stages of editing. By the time I began to flesh it out I was shooting very little, and concentrating mainly on fashioning what I already had into polished artefacts.

I therefore contented myself with mere observation and shallow comprehension, and moved along.

II STRANGEMAKING

Several months ago I began a project which required me to approach and photograph much older people. Inherently, I found this project somewhat strange to me as to plan to photograph a subject is in itself contrary to my usual method of practice. I was at first confident, and received much support from others, including the subjects of my photographs. As I began to process and scan my film I became further encouraged, seeing as I had captured what I believed to be evocatively potent and aesthetically successful representations of subject and character, all the elements which contribute to the “fiction of the image” (Badger, 56) which, to me, is an essential part of the portrait’s magic.

But then something happened. When I made prints to give Leon, my first subject, I was struck suddenly with the notion that my subjects would not like these images. In discussing the phenomenology of the ‘photo-object’ Elizabeth Edwards writes that once the print “engages with the body, it also retemporalizes or respatializes the photograph” (230): once these malleable files, workable, digital lumps of raw material, which to me had no visible index in the physical realm, had been fashioned into a real, tactile article everything changed. In *Camera Lucida*,

Roland Barthes says that “we have an invincible resistance to believing in the past... except in the form of myth. The photograph, for the first time, puts an end to this myth... Every photograph is a certificate of presence” (87–88).

The reality of this presence is jarring. This jarring feeling, to me, seems to meet the description of Barthes’ *punctum*—the “sting, speck, cut... that accident which pricks me” (88)—the bridge between the world of image and concept which makes its presence known through physical discomfort. Something in my perception had shifted, and suddenly I felt very bad.

And yet what evidence is there really to justify my prevarication? Why did I think that Leon would not like his portrait? Given that he dedicated a whole afternoon to me, including almost a quarter of an hour spent sitting before my camera, no doubt he trusts my artistic vision—why should I not trust it myself? Something does not add up, and I sit here scratching my head. It is time to reconsider things.

One cannot learn from what has already been learned—it is only by introducing an alternate and unfamiliar perspective that one is able to reconsolidate qualitative information in a new way. In order for me to learn anything communicable about my working method therefore, I must first ‘make it strange’ to me. D. Wilde & K. Andersen endorse the merits of strange-making:

“It is centered on the idea that the act of experiencing something occurs in the moment of perception and that the further you confuse or otherwise prolong the moment of arriving at an understanding, the deeper or more detailed that understanding will be.” (358)

In this sense, it is only through the strange-making of one's methodology that one can hope to research or garner new knowledge claims from one's practice and develop a "deeper or more detailed" understanding of it.

Ross Gibson identifies "the shift in commonsense and the fresh ability to account for that shift" (5) as the moment of acknowledgement which occurs as a direct result of reflection-in-action. Donald Schön posits that this shift is able to occur when a familiarly tacit procedure is "interrupted by a surprise" (Schön, 32). The recognition of this Schönian 'surprise' leads to the question "What understandings and strategies of mine have led me to produce this?" (Schön, 32), which spurs a diagnostic combing ("reflection and experiment[ation]") of "the knowing-in-action implicit in action" (33). Strange-making is, in essence, a theoretical description of the process of 'learning from one's mistakes'. I now understand the Schönian Surprise to be the primary catalyst for 'making strange' my praxis.

And so, sitting at my desk staring at the prints that I was unable to show my subject, I began to consider my surprise, the 'sting' of the real. I impeded the velocity of my workflow sufficiently to analyse where the problems were generated and immediately recognised that the root of quandary was the same as that underpinning the case of Dr. J. This was my Shönian Surprise.

III

COMING TO A HEAD

I worry that Leon may not be happy seeing himself the way I see him. I assume, perhaps without mediated grounding, that older people will be self-conscious of the stray hairs, puckered skin or sunken cheeks which make them such good subjects. After all, these aesthetic trappings which make for strong images are also insistent totems of the subject's irrefutable presence within my image.

All the things I liked about my photographs seemed suddenly an overwhelming testament to this presence. The representational choices I was making in composition, lighting and arrangement all became impositions, invasions. My appropriation seemed a crude reduction of the complex unit operation of a 'person' (i.e., a living, breathing, free-thinking agent) down to a rudimentary semiotic caricature for my own ends. In short, exploitation. To me, Leon is a fine subject for a beautiful picture. But to Leon perhaps, staring his photographic double in the face, the man in the frame is a harbinger of uncomfortable but irrecusable truths.

And he was *always* there, Leon's image-world double, staring at me with unflinching defiance, condemning me for my devil-may-care flippancy in the face of his staunch veracity. I would read his name everywhere, see his face on strangers in the street and sometimes, when I was alone with my thoughts, I could hear him whisper into my ear, only when I turned to face him I was met only with my inescapable solitude.

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He would visit me in dreams, like a great and terrifying ancestor, plaguing me with challenging questions regarding the direction my life was taking, in Yiddish (which I certainly don't speak).

Composing portraits, he would flash for a moment through my mind. As I would bring the eyes into focus I would instead see Leon's eyes on the ground glass, haunting me with his disapproval. Cloaked under my dark-cloth I would see the final image composed on ground-glass, and in my privacy I would hesitate, take a breath, and then do my final focus. Given how tacit my methodology is, and how sure it requires me to be of my intuitions, I find such a hesitation a significant impediment to my work.

I remember these surprises, I remember the moral issues brought up by the subsequent introspection, and I remember the sickeningly heavy feeling associated with the weight I attributed to their outcomes. It becomes apparent that this issue will not go away unless I significantly rethink something.

Without even showing Leon those prints (which still displace air in an old paper-box in my darkroom) I abandoned the project. Even at the time I think I understood that this decision was rash, but without being able to resolve my ill sentiments I was loath continue working. Aside from a mild anxiety associated with a new method of approaching subjects (i.e., active solicitation) I suspect that the feared unknown which prevents me from engaging comfortably with this project is not the method, but the moral base upon which I justify my actions, which I do not properly understand. What

is in play here are the motions of an old and tacit moral system, built upon unsteady ground, but hermetically sound in the sway it holds over my conscience. The underlying issue is the nagging question that my ambivalence generates—if achieving a good likeness of a person makes my stomach sink, what sort of photography am I morally comfortable practising? Again, I must stop and apply Schön’s query—“What understandings and strategies of mine have led me to produce this?” (32).

Having been interested in photography from a very early age, I think I probably take my right to represent others for granted. Any questions of its morality enter in after the fact. As a photographer, I have long since understood my role to be active, but it is unclear whether more power lies with me or my sitter. As Suren Lalvani urges his reader to “begin to realise the extent to which... bodies, made visible to power by photography, are subverted and construed submissively into political spaces” (445), I begin to think about the role of the image-maker as storyteller, as well as the viewer as an active listener. Many people already mistrust the photographer—how can I continue to practice if I can not say that I have tested the moral foundations of my practice and found them firm? I wonder about the sort of power I have over others and as I wonder, I hesitate. Then I miss the shot I wanted, and it is all for nothing.

Thus an inquiry into the morality of photography seems the only way forward.

CHAPTER TWO

++

MORALITY

I
A PARABLE

A friend once told me of a situation where an Indian child without arms, legs, or adequate flesh to cover his bones was left out in the street by himself, to beg. The situation was described to my friend by a photographer, and when my friend asked “What did you give him?” the response came “1/500 at f/5.6”.

While telling this story as a joke eschews the need to draw conclusions on how to act, the moral thesis is still poignantly stated in that the irony which makes the humour feeds off the assumption that no moral human being can look into the face of such a child and stand aloof. Akin to Peter Singer’s proverbial drowning child, where “all agree that distance and nationality make no moral difference” (Singer, 1997, n.p.), it is implicit in the rhetoric of the storytelling that any sane moral agent will share this perspective.

A photographer may frame this story with black humour as a way to demonstrate that he is morally cognisant while evading commitment to an earnest ethical stance. The giving of the information alone, though nothing need be explicitly asserted, introduces a complex moral question which lingers beyond the nervous laughter or silent scrutiny which typically follow the punchline. The other party is left to ‘draw their own conclusions’ based on their own moral compass, albeit informed by the storyteller’s rendering of the facts—for that

is what the photojournalist is—a storyteller. Walter Benjamin writes:

“It is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it... The most extraordinary things... are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that [mere] information lacks.” (2006, 366).

This description of an ‘accurate relation’ ‘free from explanation’ or ‘psychological connection’ well fits the photograph, if considered as a document in isolation (i.e., separate from caption or article). It also well fits our man’s ‘joke’, a parable without a moral. To convey information in this way is to refer on ethical responsibility (theoretically to people who are in a better position to wield it), and is in itself a moral action. This is the genius of journalism, and through it one can come to better understand the moral positioning of the photographer.

II

CONSEQUENTIALISM

One of the more controversial images to come out of Africa (and there is no shortage) is Kevin Carter’s *Struggling Girl*, 1993. The image depicts a young girl, her face to the

earth, being patiently watched by a vulture. Letters and phone-calls “poured” into the *New York Times* after its publication (March 26th, 1993), followed by a “maelstrom of public, journalistic and academic debate about Carter’s failure to help the girl” (Cate, n.p.). Paula Gortazar reports that “He was blamed for just photographing—and not helping—the little girl” (n.p.).

Amongst other things, Carter was condemned as “devoid of humanity... inhuman... uncaring” (Cate). One reader wrote in to the *St. Petersburg Times*, Florida, stating that “on a scale of 1 to 10, [Carter’s] humanness ranks as -10” (Cate). That same paper wrote “The man adjusting his lens to take just the right frame of her suffering, might just as well be a predator, another vulture on the scene” (n.d., in Gortazar). His case was not helped when it later came to light that Carter, after composing the image, “waited for twenty minutes until the vulture was close enough, positioned himself for the best possible image and only then chased the vulture away” (Cate). Presented thus, it is difficult to see Carter’s actions as anything short of deplorable, this much is clear, but in order to make moral sense of this we must question why it is that these actions should be viewed thus. But no discussion is so simple as ‘moral/not moral’.

“The question of whether to ‘get involved’ ” is explored at length by Daniel R. Bersak (25), in writing a thesis which concerns itself with “how photojournalism’s ethical system came to be” (2). He focuses, as is common and apt, specifically upon the duties of a photographer operating in the theatre

of war in order to demonstrate his point. He posits that a photojournalist “might have saved [a] life” in many situations, but “on the other hand, ‘helping out’ made photographers complicit with their subjects, and removed some of the distance necessary for journalistic objectivity” (2). This question introduces a potential reading into Carter’s motives that perhaps scores him a little higher on the ‘humanness scale’: he was simply doing his job in a way that, according to his paradigm, seemed morally justifiable.

The question appears to be one of conflicting duties, and *prima facie* the dilemma exists thus: must one always prioritise his humanitarian virtues, i.e., to “save [a life] when we can do so at relatively little cost to ourselves” (Singer, 1997, n.p.)? Or is he morally bound to fulfil his journalistic duties—to report unadulterated facts with “integrity and ethics” to the best of his ability (Bersak 20)?

Singer would probably argue the former, claiming that “we ought to be preventing as much suffering as we can without sacrificing something else of comparable moral importance” (1972, 238). He maintains that we are morally obliged to give where we can, up to the point of “marginal utility”, viz. the balance point of ‘comparable moral importance’ (241). In the case of *Struggling Girl*—where a life is potentially at stake—the threshold of marginal utility sits at the sacrifice of one’s own life (never mind one’s vocational duties). If this argument is valid for a drowning child, as in Singer maintains, no doubt it stands for children being eaten by vultures.

For *Life Magazine* photographer Larry Burrowes, who “more often than not put down his camera and... help[ed] an injured soldier” (Bersak, 26) this is the end of the dilemma. Echoing Singer’s argument, Burrowes questions “Do I have the right to carry on working and leave a man suffering? To my mind, the answer is ‘No, you’ve got to help him.’ ” (Burrowes in Bersak, 26). The kernel of Singer’s argument (and that of Burrowes) concerns itself with the consequence of one’s actions. The moral imperative here is dictated not by the action itself, but rather by the subsequent outcome it yields. Reduced to the simplest possible binary decision, to save a life or not to, the consequential utility yielded of the former choice may be clearly termed the ‘greater good’.

III

IMPERATIVES

To provide a point of contrast Bersak discusses Nick Ut’s Pulitzer-winning photograph *Napalm Girl*, which depicts Vietnamese children running down the street after an American napalm strike in 1972, their faces contorted in terror and pain. Centre frame is the eponymous minor, fully nude after her clothes have literally been burnt off her body. Ut’s potential duty to ‘help out’ aside, there are not many foreseeable situations where it would be permissible to run an image of a fully nude minor screaming in unspeakable pain as she suffers horrific chemical burns on the front page

of the *New York Times* (11th June, 1972). But this was one of those situations, and in the end the editors “chose to sacrifice the girl’s privacy, and perhaps offend their readers in order to present an unflinching picture of the conflict and ultimately to serve the greater good” (Bersak, 25). There is that concept again of ‘the greater good’ which had so neatly made the previous point.

The ‘greater good’ in this case is the dissemination of the truth of the atrocities of war. *The New York Times* dares the viewer to look into those children’s faces and justify why they, as American voters, capitalists or as human beings have allowed this to happen. Similarly Carter’s *Struggling Girl* depicts a scene so morally jarring that it is impossible to absorb passively alongside a textual article: it is an image that makes people care about other people they didn’t necessarily know existed.

“Preventing as much suffering as we can”, as Singer implores of us, is not necessarily as simple as the preservation of one life. To employ a utilitarian model one must consider consequence in terms of distinct linear outcomes (i.e., ‘a leads to b leads to c’), as opposed to a fluid stream where events flow into one another. In lesser matters where direct consequence is not of too much weight this is not an issue, but in considering outcomes over a long enough timeline the moral choice may become confused.

Evidently considering things over a longer timeline, Tom Junod writes for *Esquire* on the journalist’s lot:

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“In the actual moment history is made, it is usually made in terror and confusion, and so it is up to people like [the photojournalist]—paid witnesses—to have the presence of mind to attend to its manufacture... one never knows when history is made until one makes it.” (n.p.)

The ‘greater good’ may thus be the possibility of (the) war ending. Who will object to the iniquities and moral transgressions committed by others if the stories are not relayed? Thousands, if not millions, may be saved. If morality is based on consequential yield it becomes difficult to argue the case for one life if its sacrifice may save millions.

And yet who here decides what is the greater good? In the case of *Napalm Girl* it has been determined by the camera operator, calculated according to a multitude of assumed conditions which are beyond his knowledge; he assumes his negatives will make it back, he assumes the papers will run them, and he assumes that people will respond to the image a certain way. Ut prioritises his assumption that this photograph will be published over his knowledge that he could get his subject to a medevac, or find out what she needs, or simply respect her privacy. To consider one’s duty according to conjecture of what will follow, that is, to follow the imperative of one’s prudence, is to act according to a *hypothetical imperative*. Immanuel Kant maintains:

“Imperatives of prudence cannot... command at all, that is, present actions objectively as practically necessary; they are to be taken as counsels (*consilia*) rather than commands (*praecepta*) or reason: the problem of determining surely

and universally which actions would promote the happiness of a rational being is completely insoluble.” (Kant, 492).

Since it is impossible to determine which actions will lead to the outcome of the greatest ‘happiness’, Kant concludes that the only definitive moral imperatives which one may follow with certainty are those which derive from a *categorical imperative*, “act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a universal law of nature” (493). The duty of conduct toward others implied by this claim is the practical imperative:

“So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means” (496).

But how practical is the practical imperative? If one is to endeavour always to treat others as ends in themselves, it becomes essential to determine a measure of Kantian ‘endness’ for use in the field. I maintain that it is at this point that many people begin to conflate (a) their ideas of one’s moral obligations toward the other with (b) their impotent objections to the general injustices of the world. So it is that we shift from a discussion of universally applicable theoretical systems of ethics to an examination of the everyman’s idiosyncratic moral ‘two-cents’.

CHAPTER THREE

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RESPECT

I
RESPECT

Doing research into human learning in situations of interpersonal interaction, Chris Argyris and Donald Schön identify an “espoused theory of action” as the reasoning somebody “usually gives” when asked why they behave the way they do in a given situation (11). They note that there is often an unconscious discrepancy between a person’s espoused theory and “the theory that actually governs his actions... [the] ‘theory-in-use’ ” (11).

I have just presented a view that the morality of representation should be assessed according to what can be established with certainty. People will likely argue an explicit case for a categorically applicable ethics, etcetera, etcetera. In practice however their tacit moral position may be a completely different theory-in-use. Despite all rational theorisation people do respond very strongly to photographs, with or without prior knowledge of them or their creators. It is a simple matter to build up a strong and rational argument around one’s immediate emotional impulse, and more often than not it is done subconsciously.

Richard Drew’s controversial image *Falling Man* depicts a man plummeting to his death from the North

Tower of the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001. Viewing this image in isolation from its background story, one may note its conspicuous harmony. The composition of the towers creates a balanced dichotomy of the frame. The doomed man, near-silhouetted, allows for perfect separation of figure-ground. The man does not flay about, but appears to gracefully freefall through the centre of the image. To view this photograph in isolation, one may be forgiven for thinking that Richard Drew had trained at the Bauhaus. Compared with the obvious chaos and tension evident in, for example, *Napalm Girl*, the aesthetic consideration ostensibly afforded to this shocking subject matter is perhaps what makes *Falling Man* such an unsettling image.

It is reasonably safe to assert that Drew was impuissant in the face of this anonymous man's death—this image does not bring up questions of the photographer's duty of care or obligations to physically help the subject at the point of capture—and yet it just seems downright *disrespectful* to aestheticise a man's death. Many images were taken of the 'jumpers', but the balance and harmony evident in Drew's image begins to muddy the distinction between journalism and art. This image invites the viewer to experience a Schöinian Surprise: to see beauty in death is for many people a concussive paradox, so it is no

surprise that publication caused an uproar. Tom Junod writes:

“In most American newspapers, the photograph that Richard Drew took of the Falling Man ran once and never again. Papers all over the country... were forced to defend themselves against charges that they exploited a man’s death, stripped him of his dignity, invaded his privacy, turned tragedy into leering pornography” (Junod, n.p.)

Junod notes that “In the most photographed and videotaped day in the history of the world, the images of people jumping were the only images that became, by consensus, taboo”. Despite the shocking imagery of foreign insurrection, calculated warfare and violent desolation news vendors routinely purvey, this anonymous footage of moribund American citizens were “the only images from which Americans were proud to avert their eyes” (Junod). Forget ‘unflinching pictures of conflict’ or the greater good, to look Death in the eye so close to home is... disruptive. Junod writes “we saw these images only until the networks decided not to allow such a harrowing view, out of respect for the families of those so publicly dying”.

This notion of ‘respect’ seems to be where the slope becomes slippery. Respect for another person is a complex, tacitly operational system of social codes allowing for functional relationships to be maintained. The notion of

‘respect’ carries within it a concept of central importance to understanding interpersonal morality.

Respect seems to be the kernel of Junod’s discussion of *Falling Man*, as well as Bersak’s account of the issues surrounding *Napalm Girl*, and it remains central to almost any discussion of a photographer’s duty of representation. So what does it come down to?

II DIGNITY

In the field of research the very act of recording a face, even a potentially unrecognisable or anonymous face, in itself generates ethical risk. Sten Langman & David Pick contend:

“In spite of its usefulness and value, there is a need for a deeper understanding of research ethics when collecting photographic data. While consideration of research ethics draws attention to informed consent and confidentiality, in the context of photography, other complex issues become evident such as accuracy of the image, empowerment, how the identity of participants is affected and how photographic research data are used and published.”
(Langman and Pick, 1)

In attempting to identify the underlying concept beneath the issues particular to the relationship created “between

the photographic researcher and those they are researching” Langman and Pick introduce “the concept of dignity” (1).

In research, the concept of dignity provides a measurement unit for determining whether ‘the ends justify the means’, (the reductionist epithet employed to assess consequential value). If a subject is treated without dignity, it is unlikely to be considered ethical. This is based on the premise that to be treated with dignity is a basic human right (assuming these exist). The first article of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights stipulates that

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

This notion of ‘dignity’ may be appropriated so that it not only applies to photography as a method of research, but more broadly as the root for many other ethical questions raised across all photographic genres, if not for all interpersonal conduct. To treat somebody with dignity is to treat them with *respect*.

Personal dignity is viewed as a fundamental human right, a central indicator of the way one should act if “endowed with reason and conscience”. To neglect a subject’s right to dignity is to employ them merely as a means, and hence is to deny their autonomous agency as an end. In this sense, dignity can be defined as a sort of measure of Kantian ‘endness’. Through dignity, it is possible to consolidate one’s intuitive emotional

views on how others should be treated with deontological (duty-bound) claims on how others *ought* to be treated.

III

DIALOGUE

Langman and Pick's dignity is a marriage of various other ideas existing in the literature of research ethics which refer to a sort of a vague concept of the word, where the "definition remains amorphous and its use uncertain" (2). Distilling it down, they separate it out into three identifiable strains: dignity in context, process and outcome.

These three concepts govern how to assess appropriate times and places to take photographs; how to assess techniques and methods of photography employed and finally to assess the utility of the research; and what is fair treatment of the subject, respectively (2–5).

In order to avoid the 'grey area' as best as possible, images discussed thus far have been rather extreme in their subject-matter. Langman and Pick's concept of dignity provides a rubric under which one is able to approach a morality of more quotidian images.

Consider Paul Strand's *Blind Woman*, 1916. While not as controversial as the other images, this much discussed head-and-shoulders portrait image typifies the genre of 'candid portraiture'. At the point of capture, Strand employed the use

of a prismatic lens, which allowed him to compose pictures at a ninety degree angle to the direction he was ostensibly pointing the camera (Palmer, 111), not that it would have mattered anyway given his subject's disability.

Daniel Palmer identifies the exchange between Strand and his subject as "unmistakably exploitative", pointing out that "not only does such a photographed subject have no control over their image... but they have not even consented to becoming an image in the first place" (111). Disregard for the subject's right to voluntary participation would represent an obvious breach of dignity-in-process were this image placed as contemporary 'research'—why should the same ethical claim not apply to a genre which is in itself defined by this breach? It may be argued that Strand was working in a different time, but Palmer argues that it is axiomatically characteristic of 'candid photography' (a broad term encompassing many modern genres of photography) to "reveal the chronic voyeurism at the heart of the photographic act" (112).

According to Gerry Badger, "the image emphasises cruelly yet most vividly, the control of the photographer who captures or steals an unasked-for representation of a wholly unsuspecting soul" (56). Badger alludes to the "three-way-dialogue between sitter, photographer and viewer" apparent in a typical portrait photograph. Daniel Palmer identifies this 'dialogue' in Ariella Azoulay's notion of the "civil space of photography... [where] the permission to stare involves an unwritten contract" between the three identified above, who constitute the "economy of gazes" (Palmer, 112). Each of

these three represent a different state in the ‘economy’, and parallels can be drawn from each to a corresponding mode of dignity. Dignity in context encapsulates a concern to meet the sitter’s needs, dignity in process concerns the methodological realisation of the photographer’s agendas, and dignity in outcome regulates the ultimate effect the image may have on the viewer.

Badger points out that “the candid portrait directly removes one third of [the] dialogue”, the subject’s relationship with the camera, and thus strips out the question of the subject’s dignity (56). He quotes photographer Richard Avedon in saying that “[a sitter’s] need to plead his case probably goes as deep as my need to plead mine, but the control is with me, [the photographer]” (56). But if dignity, or respect, is the key to interpersonal morality how can Strand’s image, or any other like it, be justified?

It suddenly does not seem so unreasonable to write off all photographs taken when the subject remains unaware as exploitative and immoral. This oversight of a basic human right (as stipulated by the United Nations) is quintessential of and necessary to a common and widely celebrated photographic method. All the same this oversight is disregarded as morally nugatory by many viewers and practitioners. To begin to understand how this is possible it is necessary to delve into the nature of perception.

CHAPTER FOUR

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PERCEPTION

I
LIKE TERMS

To borrow a dictum from a primary school teacher of mine, Jenny Bihary:

“You cannot add apples and oranges” (n.p.).

While she was using it to demonstrate the rudiments of arithmetic, it is useful here to understand how it is that people can appear to overlook a misdemeanour of human rights whenever it is convenient for them.

One may determine in research involving intentional deception that the consequential benefit of a breach in dignity (see Slone and Hull, 246) may outweigh the disbenefit. Likewise in documentary photographic practice a utilitarian argument might be used to justify the neglect of one old blind woman’s claim to dignity if it leads to the inspiration of a collective social conscience, even if the method employed involves a micro-deception, as in the case of *Blind Woman*. This is the same argument used by Daniel Bersak to justify the exposure of *Napalm Girl*, as previously explored.

But, as anybody who has tried to count unlike fruit can tell you, one cannot solve the equation for utilitarian benefit using unlike terms. If the the benefit of (x) many

people outweighs the disbenefit suffered by one woman, it is only because one woman = 1, and $(x) > 1$. For this claim to stand the one must never be considered as a person proper, but always as a depersonalised and quantifiable unit. Badger points out that the anonymous blind subject “has become an icon... but it is not as an individual; it is as a subject, or more accurately, as a subject-object” (58).

This quantification is achieved through applying a process of depersonalisation, a mode of psychological reductionism which allows for the complex systems which make up a person to be reduced to a measurable integer. The ability to separate embedded in the very nature of human perception.

II THE ANALOGON

In his seminal essay *The Photographic Image*, Roland Barthes questions the communicative capacity of the photograph:

“What is the content of a photographic message? What does the photograph transmit? By definition, the scene itself, literally. From the object to its image there is of course a reduction—in proportion, perspective, colour—but at no time is this reduction a transformation (in the mathematical sense of the word)” (16).

A photograph may be a faithful record of that which it images—but it is still only an image. The anonymity and immortality of Paul Strand’s blind subject, frozen in time, implies a history and a future that do not need to have any correlation with the true history of the woman pictured in order to convey the intended effect. As Suren Lalvani notes, “the privatised subject is also capable of exteriorising the self-as-body for the purposes of reconstructive display and the subsequent appropriation of symbolic value” (445). Once this woman crosses from *the* blind woman (signified), to simply *a* blind woman (signifier), the viewer is able to overlook the subject’s claim to dignity.

Thus when one weighs up the suffering of an individual for the betterment of many (i.e., considers the ethics of photographer-subject relations from a utilitarian perspective), the individual in question ceases to be a real person and becomes a hypothetical person, or integer. The body is important in a social portrait only inasmuch as there is a body, but its relationship to any sort of ‘reality’ beyond mere indexicality to Minkowski space is insignificant. Verisimilitude is crucial to a good image, but veracity is of no consequence.

Kim Phuc, Jonathan Briley, Florence Owens Thompson, Sharbat Gula. These names refer to *real* people, but few people know them. On the other hand, many people know the categorical descriptors *Napalm Girl*, *Falling Man*,

Migrant Mother (Lange, 1936) or *Afghan Girl* (McCurry, 1984). These descriptors refer to arbitrary images, which refer to collective experiences, accumulated knowledge and assumption based around the *premise* that these images refer to real people. As Badger points out, “in the social portrait we study a type”, rather than an individual (56). In spite of the potential to evoke in the viewer a sense of profound solidarity with the pictured subject, in truth the connection is no less removed than that which they might share with the Leonardo Da Vinci’s model for the *Mona Lisa*.

The phenomenological premise which makes this distillation possible is that of the analogon, borrowed from Sartre’s *The Imaginary* (the book to which *Camera Lucida* was dedicated):

“[An image] aims in its corporeality at an absent or nonexistent object through a physical or psychic content that is given not as itself, but in the capacity of analogical representation of the object aimed at... In the image consciousness we apprehend an object as an ‘analogon’ for another object” (Sartre, 52).

In his lecture *The Thing*, Martin Heidegger states that the thing represented “does not consist in its being a represented object... nor can it be defined in any way in terms of its objectness” (114). Rather, ‘the thing’ exists in concept, independently of its connection to the physical world. The

photographic image is capable of showing faithfully only the object, and not the thing represented in and of itself. The ‘object’ for Sartre may also refer to metaphysical ‘objects of consciousness’, so that the even the “purely psychic ‘content’ of the mental image cannot escape this law” (53).

III

REPERSONALISATION

René Magritte plays upon the image-literate viewer’s natural inclination to assign transcendent meaning to the analogon when he asserts that his image of a pipe is not a pipe proper. Since the (photographic) likeness of the object, although limited in its physical properties, is capable of recalling to mind ‘the thing’ as it exists independently of the object—represented in its purer metaphysical form—the freedom of the imagination allowing for a potential totality otherwise impossible through strictly empirical perception. Sartre states of human likeness “The matter of a portrait is a quasi-face” (50). To behold a portrait is not to consider the person proper, but “[a person] in general, a prototype that acts as a thematic unity of all the individual appearances of [that person]”, a mere symbol (50).

When one beholds the portrait photograph they rarely perceive the object, but instead ‘the thing’ implied by it (Heidegger, 114). One interprets the represented as a person,

as opposed to the abstract mass of texture and form that they are actually perceiving. Only when the image is being assessed *qua* image, for the sake of aesthetic criticism for example, is the analogon made explicit.

This is allows the contemporary viewer to relate emotively to the pathos generated in Paul Strand's portrait of an anonymous woman they will never meet suffering from an ailment they have no direct experience with, while simultaneously overlooking the possibility that it is a breach of her dignity to portray her in such a vulnerable state. This 'quasi-face' is analogous with the one photographed: an analogon is not the same as the original but equivalent (Sartre, 51). Strand's *Blind Woman* presents a face devoid of a person, waiting to have one assigned by the viewer at the point of perception. Perception thus is a process of repersonalisation.

CHAPTER FIVE

FABRICATION

I
REALISM

John Tagg postulates that the ‘reality’ of photography is actually just ‘realism’ where “the process of production of a signified through the action of a signifying chain is not seen”(98). As he states:

“Realism is a social practice of representation... It works by the controlled and limited recall of a reservoir of similar ‘texts’, by a constant repetition... By such ‘silent quotation’, a relation is established between the realist ‘text’ and other ‘texts’ from which it differs and to which it defers... realism fixes the positions of its readers in order that the transaction between signifier and signified may take place.” (98)

As the process of repersonalisation becomes explicit to the viewer, as in the case of *Falling Man*, the signifying chain is laid bare. The beauty of the frame leads the viewer to consider the image-object before the thing implied by it, and thus illusion of immanence is broken. So strongly did people react to awareness of the chain that reporter Peter Cheney was assigned full time by the *Toronto Globe and Mail* to the daunting and arguably task of identifying the faceless ‘jumper’ (Junod). Approaching the daughter of an employee of the restaurant situated on the top floor of the North

Tower thought to be the man pictured, Cheney was met with the firm assertion that “That piece of shit is not my father” (Junod.).

Peter Cheney identifying the anonymous jumper does not alter his fate, and yet some people obviously assign great significance to the task. Does identifying the herald of Death mute his trumpet’s tattoo? It is again the role of ‘dignity’, and the way that we relate to it, which is central to the discussion.

In the case of *Napalm Girl* the chance that any member of the American public will personally know Kim Phuc, a nine-year-old girl from an obscure Vietnamese village, is negligibly low: like a mail-order analogon, she comes as a blank face out of the box, waiting to be repersonalised—“a message without a code”, to phrase it in Barthian terms (17). She is to the viewer a fantasy, a story, and moral judgements are passed in the world of the story: moral questions raised concern the way characters in the story interact with one another. Did the photographer do everything he could to help her? Was the napalm strike upon her village justifiable? The story implied by the image is relatable enough to begin making categorical claims about who should be doing what. Like walking past Singer’s child drowning in the park, seeing a child in

pain forces upon the sane moral agent a sense of realism through the empathy it evokes.

Falling Man on the other hand might have been anyone—your friend, your neighbour, even your father. To depersonalise your father, to assign to him a story, a new history, a new (albeit brief) future is to deny the relevance of his existence and his dignity in a swallow. The questions raised do not relate to the man implied by the image, but the man actually imaged. The moral quandary shifts hands, as there is now an onus upon the viewer to perceive intelligently.

II

ETHICS OF PERCEPTION

In the case of the quadruple amputee introduced at the beginning of our discussion of morality, the photographer makes his decision to photograph based upon an ethical paradigm established for a documentary working system. Since to convey a story is the primary duty of the documentary photographer, to recount the story of its making serves the same purpose as showing the photograph. To tell it as a joke, without resolving the moral query raised, is to refer the passing

of judgement onto the listener, as a photograph would do for the viewer. What the photographer chooses to include—or exclude—is not dissimilar to the way a storyteller may frame his tale to allow the listener to draw his own conclusions.

For the viewer to expound upon the dignity of the subject in frame is an exercise in question begging, since for all intents and purposes that subject does not exist as a person proper with a real history and future. As John Berger suggests in *Another Way of Telling*, “one can play a game of inventing meanings... meaning is discovered in what connects, and cannot exist without development” (86, 89). The person that the viewer perceives is a simulacrum, positioned by the photographer as a plot element in the story he is telling. A still image cannot have natural development to the viewer who was not present at the time of its creation, development must be imposed on the image after the fact. Its history and future are interpolated based upon the facts given (in the caption or article) or by drawing upon their own bank of knowledge.

To demand of the the photographer that he should ‘get involved’ is to overlook the fact that he already *is* involved. The very fact that they are even in a position to make resolute moral claims in the first place is the

consequence of his involvement as storyteller. The image then says for the photographer ‘This is what I have done, now what will you do?’, and thus the moral demands the face makes in its irrefutable existence are referred on from the photographer for the viewer to bear. This is how he justifies himself: as a moral conduit.

If Kevin Carter acted wrongly in photographing *Struggling Girl*, it was because he got too close—he created an image so poignant it forced the viewer to consider their relationship to the real, pictured girl—whatever her name might have been (or might still be). His figurative hand moved into frame, the signifying chain was laid bare and the illusion of immanence shattered.

The viewer is not in a position to make categorical claims about the practitioner’s actions. The photographer is simply harnessing the character and experience of a real subject to tell a story, as does the journalist or the novelist, and it is useless to discuss what the storyteller ‘could have done’—such affairs are for the practitioner alone to resolve using his own moral compass.

It is one thing to work towards an ethics of representation, but perhaps there also exists an ethics

of perception. In the 21st Century there are very few people who are not exposed in some capacity to photographs. The viewer has an obligation to ensure that they are capable of image-literate introspection, if they want to be making ethical claims. Regardless of Carter's original motives *Struggling Girl* is a call-to-action, and it is the viewer's responsibility to be able to read it that way and accept that whatever happened at the time (which they can never really know) has come to pass for better or worse, and now the ball is in their hands. Only then can the emotions swelling within them be turned toward actually solving the problem, rather than just preventing it from being photographed.

III
GENERALISING

So now we have managed to assert that there exists a moral responsibility specific to perception, but still now one unique or ontologically singular to photography. Since the suffering one understands when looking at a picture of a child in a distant country (a signifier) is their own projected understanding of suffering as they have experienced it, there is not

really any extralinguistic element to the photograph that requires rethinking—the photograph may more efficiently evoke the same things as a literary journalistic piece, but they are still the same. The analogon, as photograph or story, is limited in its power of recall to what is already understood, nothing new can be learned from it. As Sartre warns, “transcendence does not mean externality” (53).

Accordingly there is nothing in this argument to be claimed which relates to photography in itself; the creation of each photograph can only be assessed ethically according to pre-existing conditions borrowed the field it is created or used for, i.e., as journalism, art, documentary, research, etcetera. Accepting this model, photography has no means of distinguishing itself ontologically from other methods of communication. A picture may be infinitely more efficient in communicating its ‘thousand words’, but they are still only words.

This leaves me somewhat equipped to deal with moral issues which may arise during the course of a job. Since I would know which field I am producing work for, it is simply a matter of determining the ethical *status quo* within that field. Unfortunately, this doesn’t get Leon’s prints any closer to his mantelpiece,

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since these photographs are ‘personal work’ I have no reference to which I may turn. I am left to follow my own moral compass, which still needs calibration. The question remains whether there is something unique and ontologically distinctive in the very eidos of photography which might generate its own ethical quandaries.

We delve deeper still.

CHAPTER SIX

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ONTOLOGY

I
IMAGES AND PHOTOGRAPHS

I find it necessary at this stage to question my conception of ‘photography’ in order to see whether my practice or writing even remain relevant in the face of the contemporary world. Charlotte Cotton’s article *Nine Years, A Million Conceptual Miles* discusses the future of photography, maintaining that “the very mechanisms of the medium’s dissemination—publishing houses, museums, commercial galleries, and art schools... with their gamut of agendas, unwittingly risk placing a stranglehold upon the evolution of the medium” (n.p.).

For ease of reference and relatability, illustrative examples thus far have been limited to famous or controversial images. As such, the discourses laid out on the nature of photography have relied upon a rather ‘traditional’ understanding of the subject-image relationship, which has not developed far beyond the ideas laid out by Roland Barthes in *The Photographic Image* (originally published 1961). Cotton looks at works which blur the boundaries between two and three dimensional physicality and begin to bridge the gap between analogous representation and original sculptural artefact (n.p.). She discusses the photographic conventions in place in the

institutional world, and how these may impede but never terminate the course that contemporary photography is taking in the art world. As she states, “no one person or institutional matrix is powerful enough to hold back the momentum of creative change or its full cluster of mitigating factors” (Cotton).

As I generally do not work to a brief, nor do I work toward any specified end even, my own practice is probably best placed firmly within the conventions of ‘art’. Many would no doubt maintain that it relies upon the more traditional conventions, long since milked dry and superseded over the many years it has taken for large format photography to pass out of mainstream practice. When I show people my work it is often likened to that of early to mid twentieth century practitioners.

Meanwhile there is Charlotte Cotton, maintaining that it is essential for “those of us who have a genuine vested interest in the future of photography as contemporary art” to “open our doors and just let this new life come in” (n.p.). It might be suggested that my use of an archaic and largely inflexible medium keeps ‘my doors’ closed, that my ostensible inability to demonstrate contemporary influence keeps ‘the new life’ out.

But photography is more fluid than this. True, I am not interested (at this stage) in breaking down the institutionally imposed boundaries between implied and

actual three-dimensionality, as Carter Mull or Sara Van Der Beek begin to do in Charlotte Cotton's writing (n.p.). While Cotton, a gallery curator by trade, may experience "a mighty rush of excitement about photography's bright new future" when she sees "independent photography that doesn't operate in a conventional art-photography way", I am personally of the opinion that 'independent operation in photography' need not push inter-dimensional boundaries.

This is not necessarily an outright 'rejection of all things contemporary', but rather perhaps a rejection of the need to produce work which is dependent on space—much less gallery space. It seems natural for a gallery curator like Cotton to understand 'art' in terms of the produced artefact, but most of the discussions surrounding photography laid out in this paper have related to the creation or existence of 'the image' as it may exist independently of that artefact. Aside from the books I produced for my folio last year, or a few pieces designed to fill spaces on walls in houses, I very rarely print my work. I know it is more impressive when printed, but I also know that far more people will view it on-screen.

When I think about my work, I think of 'images', not 'photographs'—to me, the 'photograph' has a rooted existence in the physical realm. There is a finality in the

print—it is terminal, it marks the end of the journey, it is a thing in and of itself, a photo-object. A Photograph (a ‘thing’ perhaps deserves a capital letter) is an icon. Even when a Photograph is restored, the negative rescanned and optimised, the restorer must remain faithful to the Photograph as it has been published, and to the artist’s vision. Photographs, understood like this, are dependent upon the artefact: a print on a wall; in a book; even published online.

But I might pull up a file from ten years ago and reprocess it in a completely different way, breath new life into it. I might draw on new influences or ideas to inform it. The image (in this context) is a constant process, or set of processes. A digital image exists as a file, or as multiple files, as well as the sidecar files that contain processing instructions for the viewing software. The digital image is a raw lump of data. Images are immaterial, and they change as the paradigms through which they can be made sense of (i.e., my own experiences) change. On the other hand it is a picture, as my camera saw it and at the same time as I saw it, and continue to see it—an image-idea. Cotton herself states “Photography’s materials... have never been more readily understood by artists or audiences as a series of conscious choices” (n.p.). And that is what the image is, an ongoing series of choices, conscious and unconscious. Just like the subject transcends the image,

as discussed in the previous chapter, so too does the the image transcend the photograph.

As early as 1936 Walter Benjamin's *Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* discusses the death of the "aura", or the stripping of the "cult value" of the unique fetishised artefact (n.p.). Similarly, the work of art in the age of digital reproduction requires no negative, no 'original' in a traditional sense, indeed, no physical artefact at all. It's reproducibility is infinite, and perfect.

Cotton states that to embrace modernity is "a genuinely impossible task for those who continue to believe photography is best sliced into monographic exhibitions and sometimes into classic genres and themes" (n.p.). One may expand this premise a step further and assert that it is no longer necessary to distinguish between separate genres or even methods of reproduction within the medium at all. I think a holistic approach provides a better way to look at the future of photography than simply to consider a narrow band of practitioners working towards the direction they have decided is 'forward'. I allow my work to be called 'art photography' simply because it does not fit comfortably into any other category, and art is always happy to pick up the orphans. If it is no longer necessary to choose a field for me work to fit into, then I maintain that my work is not art, since

it is not created necessarily for that purpose, and label it simply as 'photography'.

Whether in enlightened hindsight or confused desperation galleries begin to see the 'art' in commercial and journalistic photography, previously shunned. Last year's exhibition Edward Steichen: Art Deco & Fashion saw the walls of the National Gallery of Victoria lined with the artist's 'bread and butter' portraits, studio headshots and pages cut out of Vogue or Vanity Fair.

The institutional understanding of the value of photography is naturally dependent upon understanding it through the Photograph, or the produced artefact, since that is what can be marketed or exhibited, but the swarming masses have long since moved on from basking in its fetishised reverence. Fans of Henri Cartier-Bresson will content themselves seeing his work on the internet, there is no need to see his prints on gallery walls. Institutions may struggle to drop the traditional art/not art distinction, but this has never been an issue for many amateurs working within online communities like Flickr or Instagram, who may achieve expansive international exposure without the aid or impediment of the institutional middle-man.

While it is easy to scoff at the non-professional practitioner, it is they who produce the vast, vast majority

of images, and thus it is they who drive the market. According to Instagram's press page there are on average sixty million images uploaded every day ([instagram.com/press](https://www.instagram.com/press)). No doubt, the fifteen year old 'artist' who maintains an aestheticised food blog on Instagram has never wasted a daydream considering the call of institutional recognition, and yet they might have tens of thousands of people following the progress of their work in real time while the 'pros' are still arguing with their printer over the accuracy of their ICC profiles or spot-healing dust bunnies out of their images because they refuse to shoot wide open.

Pinterest allows the modern creative to throw all their favourite images into a virtual shoebox, often uncredited and out of context. Famous photographs are blogged, and reblogged. Images appear in people's newsfeeds, make their impression upon the undiscerning viewer, and then disappear into the aether forever amidst the deluge of images they are exposed to every day. And it is amidst this deluge that higher end institutions continue to have Thursday night openings with cheese and wine to showcase work created ten to twenty months or years prior by a handful of specific artists answering questions nobody asked and dare to think of themselves as 'contemporary'.

Many modern viewers see an image in a flash, and then it is gone, the creator is insignificant. Again I harken back to Barthes' nineteen sixties writing when I quote the aptly titled *Death of the Author*, "the unity of a text is not in its origin, but in its destination" (6). As the image moves into the public sphere, isolated from the petty biographical details of its creator (and therefore its history and contextual meaning), it shifts in form and becomes once again a Photograph—an artefact.

Barthes goes on to state, however, that "this destination can no longer be personal: the reader is a man without history, without biography, without psychology; he is only that someone who holds gathered into a single field all the paths of which the text is constituted". So then the value of photography is once again assessed according to what can be learned from the artefact. But, as discussed in the previous chapter, there is nothing new to be learned from examining photographs, since the photographs function by simply drawing on pre-existing experience.

It becomes necessary to make a distinction between the experience of photography for the practitioner and the viewer. The artefact encompasses all that photography is for non-photographers, so for practitioners photography should be considered beyond the practice of creating artefacts. For a photographer, photography is about

making an image, one that begins as a mental image and is brought into physical (or quasi-physical) existence through a continuous practice of interdimensional translation.

This understanding can be applied not only to one's own images, but also to those of others. In much the same way that painters will continue to make pilgrimage to Paris or Uffizi to see the work of the great masters, some people go to great lengths to establish precisely where a photograph was taken, visit, and sometimes 'rephotograph' that spot. Christopher Rauschenberg's work, *Paris Changing: Revisiting Eugene Atget's Paris*, documents images of Paris in the 1990's which are compositionally mimetic to photographs taken of the same places by Eugene Atget in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries.

Revisiting the place pictured demonstrates its independent development beyond the moment frozen in the static artefact—rephotography considers the transcendent object beyond the subject. Simultaneously, when 'then and now' images are presented side-by-side (as in Rauschenberg's work) or otherwise composited together, compositional mimicry acknowledges the hand of the artist as being integral to the image and its ability to convey a sense of 'place'. Thus while a painting might

sit on a gallery wall, a photograph seems to sit *beyond* it. The photograph is understood simultaneously as a series of technical and compositional choices made by a practitioner and a chance sampling of a real moment in time and space. It is this reference to the ‘real moment’ that is and has always been central to photographic ontology.

II INDEXICALITY

In the age of photoshop, capitalism, and digital reproduction Geoffrey Batchen muses on the “death of photography” (207). As he ponders “the dilemma of photography’s ontology”, he establishes early on that “artifice of one kind or another is... an inescapable part of photographic life. Photographs are no more or less ‘true’ to the facts of the appearance of things in the world than are digital[ly generated] images” (212). Batchen decides instead that what gives photography its “identity as a medium” is

“The uniqueness of its indexical relation to the world it images... as a footprint is to a foot, so is a photograph to its referent. It is as if objects have reached out and touched

the surface of a photograph, leaving their own traces, as faithful to the contour of the original objects as a death mask is to the face of the newly departed. Photography is the world's self-produced *memento mori*. For this reason, a photograph of something has generally been held to be proof of that thing's being, even if it is not the truth."
(212–213)

Batchen reassesses the ontological query, 'What is it?', considering it *ab initio*. He removes the element taken for granted—the loaded precept of 'it'. The question left becomes simply 'What was there in the first place?' A photograph, before anything else, is simply a quantitative mapping of the electromagnetic radiation present in Minkowski space when the shutter was released. A photograph of a face means nothing except that a face was photographed—it is philosophically naked, another 'mail-order analogon'. Everything that follows is hypothetical, but the raw information presented in a photograph is categorically true.

I have presented the view that the image can have no relation of sameness to its subject, but only equivalence. This is true for the viewer without direct experience of the object photographed, who can understand the photograph only in terms of its nature qua artefact. For the photographer, it is different. Each image is a process which exists as part of his life and experience. It came

into existence through his experience, and is dependent upon and inseparable from it. For the photographer the photograph is therefore empirically indexical.

But then what of the viewers who have known the subject's personally? Or the subject's themselves? Even though the image they see is not a direct experience of theirs (at least, this exact photograph has no relation to any mental image that they themselves have actually experienced), it may still recall direct experience to mind. In *Camera Lucida*, a bereft Roland Barthes tries to find his recently deceased mother in photographs, "My grief wanted a just image, an image which would be both justice and accuracy—*justesse*: just an image, but a just image" (70). Unconsoled by photographs portraying only "her crudest identity, her legal status" (109), he finally stumbles upon the Winter Garden Photograph. He states that in this image "I do much more than recognise her... I discover her" (109). For Barthes, the object (his mother) transcends the image, crossing from equivalence to sameness.

At the same time, Barthes recognises that this sameness can never be the same sameness for any other person. He states:

"I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations

the “ordinary” it cannot in any way constitute the visible object of a science; it cannot establish an objectivity, in the positive sense of the term” (73).

In the same way that the photographer’s experience is crucially inseparable from the image, the indexicality of the Winter Garden Photograph for Barthes is reliant upon one detail in the image which recalls an experience which is in its nature unique to him—the *punctum*.

III ALTERITY

Morality as we have explored it in previous chapters is not an empirically measurable science. Its nature shifts from case to case, defiant of systemisation. In order to understand morality, we have borrowed established ethical claims from prominent ethicists such as ‘it is wrong to let a child drown’ (or be eaten alive by vultures), in order to assert *a fortiori* that an extreme image taken under extreme conditions raises moral questions.

If we have established that the ‘truth’ of an image is indexical but personal, it should then follow that the moral claims generated by the prospect of this ‘truth’ are just as personal. Ethical rules govern actions because

actions lead to outcomes. Moral quandaries arise when the relationship between action and outcome is made explicit. For example, being made aware of the death and suffering which occurs as a direct result of the meat industry may lead a person to consider vegetarianism—it is the shock of reality, the Schönian Surprise or the realisation that actions are not played out in a vacuum but that they must lead to consequences, that *demand*s moral cognisance.

It occurs to me that perhaps the fervour with which one puts forth arguments regarding the duties of the photographer is driven, at least in part, by the panic which ensues when one is reminded of the inevitability of death. In these images of terrorism and warfare the prospect of death imposes itself on the viewer more insistently than in others. But every photograph is by its very nature a *memento mori* since its creation—involving a precise exposure—is necessarily dependent upon the passage of time. I have stated that even in my own work, sometimes when looking at portraits of sick or elderly people, I am startled by the unexpected presence of Death, staring back at me through somebody else's eyes.

However death itself must not be what is chiefly objectionable. Death is uncomfortable, but undeniable. If people's moral objections to the creation of these images were really only on the grounds that they—as *memento*

mori—make them uneasy then there is no discussion of an ethics of representation, simply a discussion of the viewer’s comfort. So we reconsider.

We understand death to be real, because we understand life to be real, and death is the inevitable antithesis of life. War leads to death. Famine leads to death. Poverty leads to death. Terrorism leads to death. Life leads to death. Anything inarguably *real* leads to death.

Enter Barthes’ *punctum*, the indexical presence imposed by a photograph, another Schönian Surprise—a shock, a reminder of the real. The *punctum*, once experienced, is an irrefutable marker of alterity. It is to this same thing which Emmanuel Levinas alludes when he discusses the call of the face. Levinas explores the foundational phenomenological basis upon which all ontological thought is based, the unalterable self-awareness from which empirical thought is derived and *a priori* logic is justified.

“I am myself not because of some character trait which I first identify, and then find myself to be the same. It is because I am from the first the same—*me ipse*, an ipseity—that I can identify every object... every being” (Levinas, 345).

Anthony Beavers observes that this existential observation is familiar in the form of the Cartesian *Cogito*

Argument, but the nature of the Cartesian (and later the Husserlian) arguments is such that ‘the Other’, being another person, still fails to be understood as an extra-mental entity (Beavers 2–3). Rather, the ipseity with “an insurmountable allergy [to]... the horror of the other that remains other” breaks down the other to familiar terms, ‘totalising’ the Other into the One through a denial of its alterity (Levinas, 346–347). In much the same way that an anonymous social portrait may be a denial of the subject’s identity and hence their right to be considered with dignity, so too is this totalisation (at the core of *repersonalisation*) a denial of the alterity of the Other.

It could be said that genuine moral issues are generated as the subject is totalised, since their right to be considered with agency—or dignity—is neglected. From here, anything is justifiable. I suppose it is at this point that I trip up with my portrait of Leon. When I take a person’s likeness, I take a true cross-section of that person and abstract it. I strip out elements which make up the empirical world through which that person comes to make meaningful sense of their thoughts, and in place of these I substitute in my own. I try to be sensitive, but sometimes I overdo it. Sometimes it is just a matter of pulling the Photoshop adjustment curve toward the other axis, but at the last moment I see that opportunity and I cannot resist taking it.

Beavers speaks of the “central violence to the other that denies the other his/her own autonomy... it occurs whenever I limit the other to a set of rational categories... indeed, whenever I know what the other is about before the other has spoken”. One may be reminded of Susan Sontag’s much invoked proposition that “to photograph people is to violate them... [it] turns them into objects which can be symbolically possessed” (Sontag, 14). It strikes me as extreme, to consider my portraits a possession, a violation, but these words are precisely consistent with the way I felt looking down at Leon’s prints as I closed the lid on them and shut them away in my desk. To deny the Other alterity is to deny them agency, which is to deny their claim to ethical consideration.

To discuss practical morality, that is to justify tacit moral sentiments, I must first recognise the Other in its alterity. To recognise the alterity of the other defines the terms for the ‘I’, thus in order to act according to my whims I am bound to first recognise the existence of the whims of the Other. It is upon this epistemology that ontological inquiry, and from there ethical claims, can be based. Levinas maintains that one comes to recognise alterity through “the phenomenon which is the apparition of the other”, the face (351). In seeing that the face of the Other differs from one’s own, one *must* concede that there

are other paradigms—“the face speaks... a face is imposed on me without my being able to be deaf to its appeal” (351). Thus every face is a *punctum*, an unimpeachable testament to alterity.

I have made explicit the tacit workings of morality and comfort. Of course, in practice one will inevitably make concessions, but with better alignment of my theory-in-use and espoused theory of action it is my hope that I will be able to smooth out the bumps quicker and more efficiently, and minimise the compromises I make unnecessarily.

As somebody who struggles to consider anything seriously, I find myself in a difficult predicament. We have delved down below a simple philosophy of ethics, beyond the phenomenological bedrock of perception and into the very core of epistemology, where I find that I am unable to take refuge beneath any more lofty theory. Levinas has led me to the plane of the irrefutably concrete, and it strikes me that perhaps it is time to venture back to where we left off from, and turn the analytical eye back upon my own praxis.

CHAPTER SEVEN

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CONSOLIDATION

I
POETRY

At my interview to get into photography school I remember being asked if I used Photoshop. Being young and green and still wet behind the ears I could recall the many conversations surrounding authenticity of images that had come up in my year twelve Art classes. Wanting to demonstrate the breadth of my proficiency while at the same time staying clear of this potentially hairy area I knew little about, I replied with the equivocal “Yes, but I try not to do anything I couldn’t do in a darkroom”. My interviewers exchanged glances and the reply came “There is an awful lot you can do in a darkroom son”.

Perhaps not so surprisingly the man quoted turned out to be our Digital Imaging lecturer, and I remember him telling us in his first class that we digitally enhance our images in order to make them appear ‘As we saw them’ at the point of capture, whatever that might mean. He clarified that the way that we expose in camera is very different to the way we want our images to look in the end, and the irony of this struck me: the camera does not see as we see, so in order to better align its eye with our artistic vision we give it some help. A digital sensor does not understand colour, we merely utilise a bayer array and demosaicing process in order to trick it into mapping out polychromatic modulation in

an interpretable way. But the Bayer array does not capture colour the same way our eye does, so to get things looking as we saw them our images need a little more help from Uncle Adobe. In essence, we distort the 'true' image in order that we may better bend it back to its 'truer' form later, which in actuality may bear little reference to the actual 'truth' of the scene as it existed at the time.

Since the elements which make up a photograph are curated and prioritised by the photographer, a photograph is not a record of any meaningful thing which actually came to pass, but rather a record of the photographer's poetic vision. Because of the indexical nature of the medium, a photograph is an arrangement of untotaled elements (that which it indexes) into a subjective hierarchy, and in the process potential meaning is assigned. The world which exists independently of perception is recorded as something which has been perceived, and this is in itself a totalisation. The morality of this is complex.

To totalise is not immoral *per se*. The *potential* for a breach of moral conduct lies in totalisation, since totalisation is a denial of the alterity of the Other, a negation of the Other's right to be considered with dignity. If we recognise that I am working for the sake of my own ends, then it is plain to see how it might make me uneasy to totalise the Other for the sake of my own ends. The outcome of my actions is not as extreme perhaps as those outlined in previous chapters where

children starve and men plummet to their deaths, but that said the agendas of the Other—a moral agent functioning independently of my own designs—should surely come into play.

Enter again Dr. J, the man I photographed at the end of the first chapter. Dr. J induced in me a Schönian Surprise when a discrepancy became apparent between my poetic conception of him and his own. Of course, I had photographed Dr. J ‘as I had seen him’, but evidently he had seen himself differently. Now that I can identify the cause of my discomfort, in order to allay it I must establish a means of ensuring that I am treating my subjects with dignity.

II FLATTERY

In the previous chapter I asserted that I assign little value to the polished artefact, but rather that I shoot for the satisfaction of shooting. Yes, I take pleasure in the process. Immense pleasure. In reading even the driest article on optical theory the hairs on my neck stand on end. There is a quality an image takes as it moves in and out of focus on ground-glass, upside down and backwards as it may be, which is impossible to understand except through direct experience. There is an excitement in its texture,

depth, illumination and detail which creates the illusion of a manipulatable three-dimensionality. Wet-printing, although tedious and messy, creates its own titillating magic as the eddy and flow of liquid in a tray causes an image to fade into existence under the sultry glow of the safelight. Being glad to shoot with little import placed on what I have shot I should be content simply to have photographed Dr. J and it should not be an issue when he tells me that he does not like the image I have created for him. But it is not so. For all my talk of not caring about the artefact when I do finally commit to finishing an image I want it to say something that the sitter can be as proud of as I am. If something must be fetishised it might as well be fetishised *well*.

Sometimes I see a beautiful image which I would not dream of committing to a Photograph—when I watch a homeless man fish through a bin, a junkie shoot up, a woman cry out in anguish and desperation. Probably scenes included in this category would depict a hungry vulture eyeing a hungrier child, or a hopeless beggar sans limbs, or a naked Vietnamese girl suffering from chemical burns. Even when the opportunity is there, these are images that I let pass me by—it is not my right to totalise these. Perhaps it will be one day, when I have lived and suffered a little more, but not right now.

To me, these images are not fair, they are unflattering. To aestheticise in an unflattering way is in this context an exploitation of a vulnerability. As I totalise their

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vulnerability, their suffering, their unfortunate position into my own language I play it down and tame their insurmountable anguish into a neat visual hierarchy. Too much is lost in translation. I take something from my sitter and give nothing in return. Perhaps if I would use them to better the world they would be justifiable, but at this stage in my career I would not, so I would not take them.

But then there are images which blur lines, images I am unsure of. Images, for example, of old people, where every crease in their brow is like a ring in a tree-trunk, and shows the agony of years like sitting through a Samuel Beckett play. Images of sick people where they look sick. Images of sad and lonely people who look sad and lonely. Images that do not illustrate the superiority of my vantage point over their own hapless lot, but instead testify to the strength they have garnered from experience. These images do not trivialise suffering, but celebrate it. These images are not flattering, but are poetic, and in their poetry are flattering. These are the images that some sitters truly love, and some sitters can't stand to look at, and some sitters truly love *and* can't stand to look at.

I am comfortable finishing these kinds of images into Photographs only when I feel that their creation has involved some collaboration. Discussing Paul Strand's *Blind Woman* I made reference to the dialogue which takes place between parties involved in the making of an image: I am comfortable to produce an image when I feel that some

dialogue has occurred between my sitter and I. It is precisely this which makes the view camera so useful to me.

III

MISCONCEPTION

Using an SLR, I am constantly looking out for people in the right environment, lit in the right way, wearing the right expression; like waiting for the stars to come into alignment. By and large, I do not bother worrying about consent, but in cases where I am unsure I need to keep my camera floating and conspicuous long enough for the subject to acknowledge it and then hope that their behaviour does not change significantly upon becoming aware of the camera's gaze. I would never move someone, or ask them to pose.

I enjoy taking these kind of photographs very much. Often I am shooting at a high sensitivity, under light conditions which vary wildly. I manufacture a sense of consistency in post-production, in my grading or tonal adjustments. The work is perhaps not so dissimilar in concept or atmosphere to *Blind Woman*. Many of the same discourses laid forth in previous chapters regarding Strand's image could be turned upon my own work, since much of it conforms stylistically to the same school of 'candid portraiture' as Strand's image.

Using a monorail camera however, the interaction I have with my sitter is completely transformed. The sort of ‘candid photography’ I practice with my SLR would be unwieldy and impractical on a large format system. The subject must be placed, positioned and asked to sit still enough to compose, focus and expose—an ordeal which may take up to a few minutes. Every part of the process is mechanical, and my sitter’s see me do everything. One sitter told me that even though they don’t understand what I’m doing, being able to see my fingers adjusting dials and watching the camera physically move made it feel more ‘honest’. It is a way of opening up that dialogue between photographer and sitter, and a way of reducing miscommunications within that dialogue.

Since a lot of people view it as ‘old technology’ strangers are less wary of my motives than when I am shooting a loud, obtrusive SLR. Given the time and energy each exposure takes, I think people trust it more than my digital camera. There is no opportunity for me to expose sneaky underhanded images while they sneeze and market them to Associated Press or worse, tag them on Facebook in an awkward pose. I used to ask people “May I take you portrait?”, but now I ask simply “Would you like a portrait?”—the process is less one-sided, the sitter has more opportunity to plead their own case as I plead mine. This minimises the occurrence of major misconceptions on the part of my sitter or I.

All of my monorail cameras are formidable looking beasts. When I started out I did great damage to my shoulder hauling around a battered old studio camera on a wooden surveyor's tripod I had found in hard rubbish. The question of consent became extraneous as my role in subject solicitation became passive: subjects simply chose themselves, captivated by the ninety-year-old brass lens glistening in the sun. This year I brought my camera along to the Guildford Banjo Jamboree. As might be predicted from the name, the demographic drawn to this particular festival includes well-built middle-aged men with long beards who maintain an active interest in precision machines of any variety.

I was approached and interrogated by one such man whose posture and size more or less excluded him from the list of people whom I would generally deem 'approachable'. Everything I told him about my camera he would liken to fishing or motorcycle maintenance. After he had extracted from me enough information on large-format photography to publish a substantial 'how-to' pamphlet, I asked if he would like to sit. He sheepishly declined my offer, mumbling excuses through his beard before collecting his wife and heading back to the pub. Two days later he tapped me on the shoulder during a session and mumbled into my ear, barely audible over my banjo, "Perhaps I'd better take you up on that offer". Afterwards he told me his name was Bearclaw, and thanked me very much.

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The cloth-and-loupe ritual remains for many people quite novel, and I think sitting for a portrait is for these people a somewhat special experience. For this reason I am able to photograph a lot of people who would otherwise not be interested. Most people sitting for me seem to enjoy it as much as I do, lapping up the attention or the opportunity to sit still and do nothing for a few minutes, and I take my time adjusting movements and taking readings.

My process is not complicated. After I find a spot in the room with passable light I ask my sitters to find a comfortable position as I am setting up my camera, in order that they may relax into it. I tell them that if they are not comfortable the image will not turn out, and continually ask them whether they are 'happy' throughout the process. I ask them to think about the 'sort of person they want to convey' or other such things and guide them gently into a position of optimal lighting. This gives them time to get used to their pose, and think about how they are comporting themselves to me.

When people look as though they have had enough time to settle in, I tell them that I am doing my final focus. At this point people assume their most serious disposition as I close the lens, cock the shutter, remove the dirty t-shirt I've been using as a dark-cloth, insert my film holder and extract the dark slide. I tell people I am going to count to three, and expose when I get there. I count it out slowly, and some people look as if they will burst in anticipation. Others,

often older people or other photographers, will sit placidly, apparently unphased by my involved motions. Most people seem to be expecting a big flash, or a twenty-minute exposure and often people will remain frozen in their pose long after I have put my film holder back into my bag and begin packing down my camera. After they've relaxed their shoulders and blinked a few times they will ask, "Is that it?". One sitter reported palpitations brought on by growing anticipation.

Most sitters report having had 'fun'.

Of course, as with any novelty or spectacle, the performative element is crucial—on my part and on my sitter's. My subjects will play up to the camera. I ask them to think about what sort of things they want the portrait to convey, and most people will respond with a formidable adjective and a quasi-poetic complement such as "eminent yet humble", "firm but magnanimous" or "audacious but percipient". In turn I ask them to channel that character, and then when I get to 'three' to give me the most intense look they can possibly muster to that effect. If they are struggling to relax into it, I might put a pair of glasses on their face, or else suggest a character to 'channel'.

It doesn't always work. Two weeks ago I photographed a boy who insisted on smiling, because that was what he wanted his portrait to say about him. I explained to him that it isn't something which I generally recommend doing, since he would have to hold his smile for a couple of minutes, and

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most people tend to look a little maniacal after doing this. He remained adamant, so I shrugged and went through with it. Looking at the image, I probably shouldn't have.

This is as close to a method of collaborative portraiture as I can hope to get from people without meticulous planning and foresight. In a sense it is manufactured, but then, so is everything. It is a misconception that any photograph can be truly be 'natural', or 'real'.

Collaborative portraiture is about performance. Images turn out good when my sitter performs for me, and I read their performance correctly. Sometimes the sitter will learn something about themselves, but more often than not they will see something they already knew was there. Usually because they put it there. Even if none of it is real and the viewer's perceptions are all misconceptions, it doesn't matter—they relate when they are able to relate, the photographer relates what he is able to relate, the sitter maintains their dignity, and the world turns.

This is the kind of portrait that lets me
sleep easy at night...

And that's the main thing.

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