

**Exposing the light chamber: a note on photography**

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The central proposition of Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*: the concepts of *studium* and *punctum* have arisen and entered into the common lexicon of photographers and artists alike. However we may wonder to what extent it is appropriate to think of photography in this way. Indeed Barthes' rather arbitrary method of inquiry and his peculiar fascination with only one kind of photograph – the sentimental – quite legitimately draws suspicion.

Barthes, being neither a photographer, nor having any inclination of being one, developed his concepts of *studium* and *punctum* from the point of view of a *lecteur* of photography. Indeed he diminishes the importance of all photographers in two concise sentences in his definition of *punctum*: that “certain ideas may 'prick' [him]. If they do not, it is doubtless that the photographer has put them there intentionally.”

In order to take this further, let us first unwrap a little the two concepts – *studium* is everything that the photographer has put there in the picture (intentionally), and according to Barthes is always culturally-coded, in the sense that to understand or recognise a *studium*, a *lecteur* must appeal to his knowledge and intellect. On the other hand, there is the *punctum*, which is always an unintentional by-product, and is essentially a personal (emotional) response to the photograph, which a *lecteur* is able to intuit or directly experience first hand, but I would argue nevertheless has recourse to his memory and imagination (otherwise all such experiences would be revelations, divine or telepathic!).

If it is the case then, as Barthes claims, that photographers can only work with the *studium*, to encode and communicate a necessarily culturally-grounded message, then how is this reconciled to the purpose of the photographer, his intentions – his *volonté*? For Barthes it is simple: “to recognise the *studium* is inevitably to encounter the photographer's intention”. Couple that with “the *studium* is of the order of *liking*, not of *loving*”, and the photographer is thus imprisoned, condemned to being merely an operator in documenting what is in the world and perhaps amusing us, but not moving us.

This is in direct contrast to the concept of art photography, which by definition requires more than just a desire to document – it is photography intended to convey the subjective

intent and sentiments of the artist, arousing emotion in the *lecteur*. It inhabits the realm of the *punctum*, and requires memory and imagination to work their magic. What then does Barthes have to say? He imagines (for he has no direct experience himself) that the “essential gesture” of photographers is to “surprise” something or someone, which he makes quite clear is different from the ‘prick’ of a *punctum*. It seems he is thinking in terms of *trompe l’oeil*, capturing a perfect landscape or an implausible scene, or indeed using the camera to show something that the eye itself cannot see – all denotative gestures that fall within the realms of his *studium*. For Barthes, the *punctum* exists only for himself, not for any other *lecteur* – it would for them only at best interest their *studium*. He makes this clear when describing the irreproducibility of the Winter Garden Photograph – that he “cannot establish an objectivity”.

And herein lies his mistake – for we stand quite easily to refute this. The essential question thus becomes: can a *punctum* be made an intentional part of a photograph?

Let us perform the following thought experiment: take the case of a photographer arriving back at his primary school, where he spent many happy years, and taking a photograph on a beautiful and chilly winter day as the scene brought back to him vivid memories of his childhood. First of all the photographer himself upon viewing the photograph will recognise the referent, being his primary school building, and the connotative associations of happy childhood memories, but at a meta level, he may also remember his intention upon taking the photograph – that it was a beautiful and chilly winter day that drew forth the memories and moved him to take it in the first place. A schoolmate of his, upon seeing the photograph, may share similar happy sentiments, recognising the place and remembering his childhood years spent there. It is unlikely that he will infer the meta reading, although upon deeper contemplation, it may be possible for him to deduce some part of it. Another schoolmate, who does not have happy memories of school may similarly recognise the place, but may conjure up quite different sentiments based on a set of wholly different experiences. A recent attendee of the school may recognise the place for being the school at a past time, and he may wonder at this and contemplate the passing of time. Someone who has never seen the school, may recognise the building as a school and think back to his/her own school and related memories. Yet another person may fail to deduce that it is a school at all and wonder why someone has taken a photograph of a wholly uninteresting building.

From this example, one can see the difficulty a photographer faces in his ability to communicate his intention with others and how this difficulty increases, or we can say the 'fidelity' of communication recedes, the further removed someone is from the same experiences as the photographer. Indeed the photographer is the only one who is able to access the referent perfectly, and he is also the only one who could possibly access his intention perfectly at the meta level. It is easy to see how one may be led to Barthes' acceptance of the total subjectivity of the *lecteur* in his interpretation of the photograph. However, importantly, this masks the fact that the photographer is actually able to share his intention to some degree, and this would depend on how well he frames the referent in the way he intends it to be viewed, although generally the fidelity of communication will fade (i) the more specific and peculiar to the photographer the original intent, and (ii) the more dis-alike the *lecteur* is in terms of common experiences and memories.



Rinko Kawauchi: Semear, 2007.

At another level, taking imagination rather than memory as the other key working component of *punctum*, let us consider photobooks or certain arrangements of photographs. In the reproduction from a photobook by Rinko Kawauchi shown above, the juxtaposition of the picture of the frog at a dried up watering hole and the salarymen at an outside bar immediately creates a linkage in our minds through our imagination. We imagine them as equivalents. This type of association, I argue is beyond Barthes' definition of *studium* – as the connotation was never in any sense encoded in either of the photographs, although the photographer has indeed intended this connotation and shared it with us (even though in this example perhaps *ex post*). It is beyond our simple understanding (cultural knowledge) of the habits and status of the salaryman to associate him with a frog (indeed taken literally it does not make sense), however it is perhaps the hunched form of both frog and salaryman in the photograph that serves to create this wild leap of imagination. This perhaps strays too far from what Barthes himself considered, but nevertheless it is another refutation.

Having thus rejected Barthes, it is only fair and natural to propose an alternative – and what I shall propose is perhaps of more use to photographers. I offer to think of photography in terms of the *referent* and *technique*.

*Referent* may be defined in its usual sense, as “that which is photographed”. Needless to say it is irrelevant whether this is seen by the eye or taken by some automatic apparatus. Indeed I would go so far that the referent may simply be something which is felt rather than seen, or implied even, like the traces of blood at a crime scene where the body has already been removed. I am of course thinking of Robert Barry's *Inert Gas Series* of 1969 which cleverly expounds the boundaries of what photography is able to depict. Green and Lowry (2003) quite clearly articulated that photographs “are not just indexical because light happened to record an instant on a piece of photosensitive film, but because first and foremost, they were taken. The very act of photography, as a kind of performative gesture, which points to an event in the world, as a form of designation... is thus itself a form of indexicality”.

*Technique* then is everything about how the photographer has taken the photograph, which includes his decisions on framing, composition, exposure, etc., through to how he chooses to print (if he does indeed print rather than show in projection or electronic form).

For a photographer not only points a camera at a *referent* (as an automaton would), he thinks about how best to increase the 'fidelity' of his communication of intent with his *lecteur*.

The *referent* then is what forms the *studium* of Barthes, but it is the *technique* which encapsulates the subjective intent of the photographer and 'transforms' the *referent*, working across both *studium* and *punctum*. These terms translate the language of Barthes into a form that can be more easily applied by the photographer, or at least presents it from his perspective. For now the photograph's ability to wound can be described in terms of the intention, the *volonté*, of the photographer (his own choice), rather than being unintended manifestations of time and death (predetermined).

As an aside, I agree with Barthes that a photograph is a "catastrophe which has already occurred" in one peculiar sense only, and it is the precise scientific sense of *Schrödinger's Cat*: that observation forces resolution of a state of quantum entanglement – it forces a future (and a history) to delineate from a superstate of neither one nor the other. In other words, the photograph is a slice through space-time. More precisely, it is the photographer who slices space-time. Indeed Barthes intuitively this by saying that a photographer's "second eye" is simply his being there, or as we have formulated more precisely, his decision to take a photograph.

Indeed I go so far to posit that it is this decision which is essential, indeed necessary and sufficient, for photography. This is demonstrated by my own scans of 35mm film ends which have undergone the developing chemistry, a series entitled "Multiple Histories" – there is *technique* only in terms of my choice of how to effect the scan, without there being any *referent* (they are essentially quasi-empty frames). It is the choice of my creating it, of slicing space-time which is the real significance – not any nostalgic quality of the photograph or identity with death (of which there is none, indeed if anything there is the implication of the opposite: infinite possibility). However, the very act of photographing, again referring back to Green and Lowry (2003), implies a significance given by the photographer that requires a *technique*, indeed moves him to adopt a *technique* (however rudimentary) – and it is this that creates the indexical relationship (the very essence of photography) rather than the *referent* itself.

This conclusion, I would say, leaves us somewhere quite removed from that of Barthes. For him, the photographer trying as hard to surprise as he may, is imprisoned within the *studium* – the world of encoded messages that does not reach out and wound him. In my alternate formulation, even discounting whatever surprise the *referent* may bring, it is the *technique*, in encapsulating the very intentions of the photographer, that is the essential identity for photography and places the photographer centre stage. So whilst a madman can indeed be wounded of his own volition quite apart from the intention of the photographer, it is more likely that the photographer has intended to wound – although his instrument is blunt (and the fidelity of transmission dependent on the individual *lecteur*). Hence the resulting *appearance* may be of a lack of objectivity – but this is ultimately what Barthes was misled by.

### Bibliography

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