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PHOTOGRAPHIC AMBIVALENCE AND HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

MICHAEL S. ROTH

ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on three topics that arose at the Photography and Historical Interpretation conference: photography's incapacity to conceive duration; photography and the "rim of ontological uncertainty;" photography's "anthropological revolution." In the late nineteenth century, blindness to duration was conceptualized as the cost of photographic precision. Since the late twentieth century, blindness to our own desires, or inauthenticity, has been underlined as the price of photographic ubiquity. These forms of blindness, however, are not so much disabilities to be overcome as they are aspects of modern consciousness to be acknowledged. The engagement with photography's impact on historical consciousness gives rise to reconsiderations of temporal extension and to the difficulties of acknowledging one's desires in an increasingly open and fractured social field. Photography's indexicality combined with its reproducibility gives rise to photographic ambivalence. As with other forms of ambivalence, we should be less concerned with diluting its constitutive tensions than with learning to live with its conflicted possibilities.

Keywords: photography, duration, Bergson, Henri; Barthes, Roland; Doane, Mary Ann; presence, absence, ambivalence, index, contingency

Photography maintains the presentness of the world by accepting our absence from it. The reality in a photograph is present to me while I am not present to it; and a world I know, and see, but to which I am nevertheless not present (through no fault of my subjectivity), is a world past.
—Stanley Cavell¹

[History] is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it—and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it.
—Roland Barthes²

In this essay I focus on three topics that arose at the conference on Photography and Historical Interpretation related to the theory of history.

1. Photography's incapacity to conceive duration

1. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 23.

2. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, transl. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 65.

2. Photography and the “rim of ontological uncertainty”

3. Photography’s “anthropological revolution”

Each of these can be related to how photography affects our ability to think of being in another place or time than the one we are in now. This problem may well link the space- and time-traveler in Nadar with Roland Barthes grounded in his grief, as both are interrogated by Stephen Bann.³ More generally, “thinking of being in another place or time” can be related to the problematics of empathy, projection, and social context that shoot through several of the essays in this issue.

I. PHOTOGRAPHY’S INCAPACITY TO CONCEIVE DURATION

This incapacity is the inability to imagine or recognize extension through time. In other words, one could recognize temporal juxtaposition (this, then that, then that), but not the interconnection of those things that are juxtaposed. Henri Bergson might have said that a symptom of the inability to conceive duration would be our continued spatialization of the temporal—our tendency through technology to imagine the temporal as a series of temporally self-contained things that take up space.

The problem of conceptualizing duration out of the instantaneous has been a topic of philosophical interest at least since classical Greece. To solve this problem Hegel reformulated it within the realm of history via the dialectic. Duration can be apprehended through the density of the now: “The life of the ever present Spirit is a circle of progressive embodiments, which looked at in one aspect still exist beside each other, and only looked at from another point of view appear as past. The grades which Spirit seems to have left behind it, it still possesses in the depths of its present.”⁴ The dialectical conception of history as embodied duration—the notion that every historical moment contains both layers of the past and seeds of the future—was the field in which photography was inserted in the mid nineteenth century. However, photography’s ability to break a “moment” down into the instantaneous radically disturbs the easy immanence associated with historical narratives that rely on dialectical unfolding.

At first glance, photography might have seemed to be the perfect technology for the era that gave birth to modern historiography. The documentary power of the camera became a powerful metaphor for realism more generally,⁵ and the indexical promise of the photographic image seemed to provide a toehold in the real for sweeping dialectical narratives. As shutter times decreased dramatically in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, personal or public occurrences became “true

3. Stephen Bann, “‘When I Was a Photographer’: Nadar and History,” *History and Theory, History and Theory, Theme Issue 48* (2009), 95-111, this issue. The phrase the “rim of ontological uncertainty” is from this paper, p. 101. I participated in the *History and Theory* conference Photography and Historical Representation as a respondent to Stephen Bann. The present essay grew out of the conversations at the conference, and I am grateful to other participants, and particularly to the organizer, Jennifer Tucker, for creating this occasion to think about photography in relation to the theory of history. I am also grateful to Charles Salas for his helpful comments on this essay.

4. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, transl. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956) 79.

5. See, for example, Nancy Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

events” because a camera was there to make a record of them. If the dream of the historian was to describe the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*, then the mechanical operation of photography seemed like a perfect ally.

By the last decades of the century, however, it was becoming clearer that photography’s capacity for representation of the instantaneous might very well explode the historicist field that had first seemed so congenial to it. Bergson’s use of Marey’s chronophotography as part of his critique of the modern conception of time illustrates this nicely. Marey and then Muybridge had devised an instantaneous photographic technique to capture particular segments of animal motion. Most famously, they depicted the stride of a galloping horse in seemingly awkward detail. An automatic camera controlled only by a timing clock “broke down” what had seemed to be a fluid, graceful motion. Bergson thought this invention emblematic of the modern distance from actual experience, a distance that led to an approach to knowledge based in analysis and delusional objectivity:

Along the whole of this movement we can imagine possible stoppages: these are what we call the positions of the moving body, or the points by which it passes. But with these positions, even with an infinite number of them, we shall never make movement. They are not parts of movement, they are so many snapshots of it, they are, one might say, only supposed stopping places. The moving body is never really *in* any of the points; the most we can say is that it passes through them. But passage, which is movement, has nothing in common with stoppage, which is immobility.⁶

Anson Rabinbach summarizes Bergson’s critique of the photographic effort to capture the instantaneous: “Marey thus confirmed Bergson’s diagnosis of the crisis of all perceptual systems: objective time was infinitely divisible; moments of experience were organized spatially, that is, the reduction of quality to quantity.”⁷ Modern time-consciousness for Bergson abandoned duration in favor of a spatialized objectivity. For Bergson, duration is really indivisible, and so no temporal segment can be isolated without distortion: “[S]cience cannot deal with time and motion except on condition of first eliminating the essential and qualitative element—of time, duration, and of motion, mobility.”⁸ Bergson anticipated how photographic technologies would infect human self-consciousness. In the pursuit of accuracy and precision, we would try to isolate parts of human experience in order to better understand it. But understanding, say, perception in isolation from memory was to begin with a distortion. Perception is always already infected with memory because the isolated moment does not exist in the real world without temporal extension.

Pure perception, in fact, however rapid we suppose it to be, occupies a certain depth of duration, so that our successive perceptions are never the real moments of things, as we have hitherto supposed but are moments of our consciousness. Theoretically, we said, the part played by consciousness in external perception would be to join together, by the continuous thread of memory, instantaneous visions of the real. *But, in fact, there is for us*

6. Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, transl. T. E. Hulme (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1955), 42.

7. Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), 113; see also Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880–1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 25–26.

8. Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, transl. F. L. Pogson (New York: Macmillan, 1910), 115.

*nothing that is instantaneous. In all that goes by that name there is already some work of memory.*⁹

Mary Ann Doane glosses Bergson's claim this way: "Perception 'exists only in theory, because it is continually invaded by memory.' Perception, from this point of view is only 'an occasion for remembering,' and 'there is for us nothing that is instantaneous. In all that goes by that name there is already some work of our memory.'"¹⁰

Photography is the perfect anti-Bergsonian technology because it records through segmentation. No segmentation, no objectivity; what Bergson called distortion *is* the accuracy promised by photographic recording. And insofar as our conception of memory—and even our actual ways of recollecting the past—is conditioned by photography, we lose the ability to perceive duration.

Michel Frizot makes the point that photography's "power to attest" allowed the medium "to completely reorganize the way the world is perceived" because photographic "data" become the standard for judging realistic representation. "The photographic image has defined the concept of an event," he writes.¹¹ And the event is an instant—a segment of time so small that we could not have grasped it with our own eyes. Photographic power is the power of segmentation. Precision is in part dependent on the rapidity or brevity of exposure. Duration is thereby defeated.

Barthes notes that the "era of Photography is also that of revolutions, contestation, assault and explosion—in short, of different forms of impatience, of all that is opposed to the notion of maturing."¹² The ability to seize the episodic is of a piece with the inability to conceive duration. If everything can be broken down into pulsing moments, into "different forms of impatience," then there would no longer be a sense of the passing of time. When Susan Sontag, almost a century after Bergson, wrote of the ways photography had come to substitute for experience and for memory, she was describing the fulfillment of the Bergsonian nightmare.¹³ Thierry de Duve has recently made a similar point: "Whereas the snapshot refers to the fluency of time without conveying it, the time exposure petrifies the time of the referent and denotes it as departed."¹⁴ In either case duration is missed; we lose the ability to attend to it. As our blindness for duration grows, so does our confidence in our ability to represent with ever-greater exactitude the most fleeting aspects of the world around us. We look only to the fleeting.¹⁵ In becoming

9. *Ibid.*, 76.

10. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, transl. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 76. See Marta Braun, *Picturing Time: The Work of Etienne Jules Marey, 1830–1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 280ff. Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 77.

11. Michel Frizot, in *Photography Theory*, ed. James Elkins (New York: Routledge, 2007), 180.

12. Roland Barthes, "The Discourse of History," transl. Stephen Bann, *Comparative Criticism* 3 (1981), 5.

13. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus Giroux, 1977).

14. Thierry de Duve, "Time Exposure and Snapshot: The Photograph as Paradox," in Elkins, ed., *Photography Theory*, 113.

15. Video recording, though, would seem to work in the opposite direction because it shows the flow of time without breaking it into frames. But this would be an illusion. Videos do extend the episode. The video recording is an elongated snapshot, but even a lengthy recording is ripped out of

attuned to the fleeting, our ability to sense events as unfolding one from the next escapes us. Bann points this out about the power of lithography in Nadar's time. Nadar recognized that lithography's reproducibility without obvious signs of authorial or artistic mediation gave it a powerful authority as a witness. But it could witness only instants. And so "instants"—intensely revelatory moments—are increasingly sought after as "news," as "facts." Photography would only accelerate this phenomenon. Iterability—repetition and circulation—gave these mechanical techniques an authority to capture the real as episode. When the real is only a collection of reproducible episodes, duration is no longer part of the real.

II. PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE "RIM OF ONTOLOGICAL UNCERTAINTY"

The "ontological uncertainty" associated with photography is tied to how its indexical nature changes our relations to other images, and to how its temporal or episodic power alters our sense of change over time. Bann notes that lithography introduces many of the elements that will eventually characterize photography's impact on our notions of realism because of its evidence of "rapid registration . . . [and] the advantage of multiple diffusion."¹⁶ Rapid registration matters because it promises a reduction of mediation between "event" and beholder. As the recording becomes more automatic, it seems to become less interpretive. The "real itself" is offered to the viewer, rather than a version of the real being given by a subject with his or her own desires, prejudices, and so on.¹⁷ A purely automatic process of registering the world seemed to promise to bring the distant real present to the viewer. The "distant real" can be thought about in spatial terms—colonial photography and efforts to "capture" the exotic would be relevant here. But the more profound disturbance brought on by increasingly rapid (unmediated) recording is making the temporally distant present. Photographic images seem to offer the possibility of re-experiencing the past, or of experiencing a past for the first time without a subjective intermediary.

This lure of re-experiencing is disturbing because when entering into the past depicted in the image we also remain aware of what happened after the picture was taken. The time frozen in the image is preserved from death or decay, but it also reminds us of the death and decay outside the image. The by now famous example of this is Barthes's description of the handsome young Lewis Payne shortly before he was executed for his attempt to assassinate the U.S. Secretary of State. The caption for the image in *Chambre Claire* is "He is dead and he is about to die."¹⁸ Why does the viewing of this image create an "ontological disturbance"

historical continuity. Photographic and video reproduction are *interruptive yet precise* modes of representation. Their accuracy is twinned to their breaking apart continuity.

16. Bann, "When I Was a Photographer," 77.

17. Susan Stewart calls the photograph as souvenir "the logical extension of the pressed flower." See her *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 138.

18. See Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, transl. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 95. Stephen Bann discusses a parallel lithographic image in his essay in this issue, 100-101. Geoffrey Batchen has drawn interesting parallels with the "dizzying temporal convolution" found in Walter Benjamin's "Little History of Photography": *Camera Lucida: Another Little*

differently from, say, reading a newspaper interview that was done with Payne in the hours before his execution? Both might be said to be “evidence” concerning the condemned man. Why does the photographic evidence raise different kinds of questions?

There is a sense in which the quasi-automatic nature of photographic depiction seems to bring us “closer” to the indexical trace of the subject of the image. When coming upon an old newspaper interview with Payne, we are still getting at the past through the apparatus of the newspaper: interviewer, editors, printers. We are at more “removes” from the past than we seem to be with a photograph “taken” from the real. Suppose we compare the photographic image to a handwritten diary entry from Payne instead of the newspaper interview? The two would still be very different because of the sense that the subject’s hand created the signs on the paper of the diary entry. (For the same reason the experience of reading the diary entry on a computer is likely to be very different from the experience of reading while holding the old paper in one’s hand.)

The photograph seems to function as a trace of the past because it makes a claim of having automatically registered the body of the subject pictured. As Barthes says, the photograph is a “certificate of presence.”¹⁹ This is akin to finding letters from a person, written in his or her own hand, or, for example, jottings in the margins of a book in her library of a person long deceased. I remember the thrill I felt when I did research in the study of Alexander Kojève, a philosopher on whom I focused in my dissertation. As I came across notes in books, or letters tucked away between folders, it wasn’t just the *content* of the notes that was exciting to me. It was that *this* marking had been made on *this* paper in *this* study by Kojève. The feeling of the presence of Kojève was compelling, though I never thought of it as a substitute for, or even as a trumping of, the published material.²⁰ Was the allure of this presence, or the fantasy of this presence, akin to the power of the photograph to disrupt one’s sense of time?

In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in “presence” as a category for the philosophy of history. Eelco Runia has offered the following explanation: “‘Presence,’ in my view, is ‘being in touch’ with people, things, events, and feelings that made you into the person you are. . . Presence—being in touch with reality—is, I believe, just as basic as meaning.”²¹ The document, the memorial, re-enactment—all seem to offer the experience of getting in touch with one’s past. In my case the impulse for archival work, in addition to its empirical payoff, also expressed this desire for presence. Another way to describe the allure of these felt traces of the past (in my case, of a dead philosopher) would be in terms of the fetish. In Dominick LaCapra’s memorable 1984 critique of cultural and social history, he made the point with characteristic verve:

History of Photography,” in *The Meaning of Photography*, ed. Robin Kelsey and Blake Stimson (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2008), 77-78.

19. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 87.

20. Indeed, I would make use of some of the unpublished material as heuristic devices and then publish the correspondence with Leo Strauss. See Michael S. Roth, *Knowing and History: Appropriations of Hegel in Twentieth-Century France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985); and Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: Including the Strauss-Kojève Correspondence*, ed. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

21. Eelco Runia, “Presence,” *History and Theory* 45, no. 1 (2006), 5.

For Freud a fetish is a substitute for a lost object, and it is related to the quest for full identity and narcissistic unity. The archive as fetish is a literal substitute for the “reality” of the past which is “always already” lost for the historian. When it is fetishized, the archive is more than the repository of traces of the past that brings the mystified experience of the thing itself—an experience that is always open to question when one deals with writing or other inscriptions.²²

LaCapra polemically described social history’s empiricist anti-intellectualism as a fetish, but it is also apt for characterizing the post-postmodern exploration of presence as an antidote to the linguistic cage of “representationalist” philosophy of history.²³ The social historians LaCapra criticized saw the archive as a touchstone of the real in contrast to the abstract theorizing or endless interpretations of intellectual historians and philosophers, just as contemporary writers resurrecting presence want to feel connected to the vast “storehouse” of the past rather than be reminded that linguistic (and social and temporal) mediations always keep history at a distance. The lost object of the past is supposed to be (metonymically) felt in the present as a “being in touch.” The past wasn’t lost after all! And this is especially worth claiming (even embracing) when the past is traumatic. Frank Ankersmit’s recent proselytizing for the sublime under the guise of “historical experience” is the most dramatic example in this regard. Ankersmit is most interested in the moments of rupture when we forget the place from which we are remembering the past: “For a moment there is only the past itself, revealing to him [the historian] its quasi-noumenal nakedness with an unusual directness and immediacy. And the same can be said for the past, the object of historical experience: It hurries toward the historian with the same eagerness to rupture its ties with what surrounds it, as is the case of the historian.”²⁴ Past and present are imagined to meet in ecstatic embrace.

How is the notion of the photograph as a “certificate of presence” related to this attempt to get beyond the mediations of language? Is the image of the would-be assassin Lewis Payne disturbing and attractive because it doesn’t only bring forth meaning but, in Runia’s words, “transfers presence?” Walter Benn Michaels has brought this issue to the fore in “Photographs and Fossils,” pointing out that the hope (or desire) that photography is not merely a picture has become central to contemporary artistic practice.²⁵ For many writers focused on the photograph’s indexical dimensions “the hope is ‘about the real world’ and the desire is for some kind of access to it, ‘a real outside of representation.’”²⁶ If photography is more fossil than picture, then we have avoided the subjective mediation of the photographer’s intentions.²⁷ Should we locate the “ontological disturbance” of photogra-

22. Dominick LaCapra, “Is Everyone a *Mentalité* Case? Transference and the ‘Culture’ Concept,” *History and Theory* 23, no. 3 (1984), 310, n.17.

23. See the sharp critical perspective on this trend by Ethan Kleinberg, “Presence *In Absentia*,” *Storia della Storiografia* 55 (2009), 43-59.

24. Frank Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 125. See my review, “Ebb Tide,” in *History and Theory* 46, no. 1 (2007), 66-73.

25. Walter Benn Michaels, “Photographs and Fossils,” in Elkins, ed., *Photography Theory*, 445.

26. *Ibid.*, 434. Michaels is quoting other essays from the *Photography Theory* volume.

27. Michaels’s essay explores how bypassing intentionality presents a challenge to the category of art. He is especially interested in Michael Fried’s recent analyses of this same issue: Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press,

phy in this very (uncanny) ability to give the beholder the impression of touching the past? Or is the notion of “touching the past” just the latest example of an inability to deal with loss? Is it another attempt to reconstitute “narcissistic unity,” this time through the effort “to commune with the numinosity of history”?²⁸

The problem with conjoining Barthes’s notion of the ontological disturbance of the photograph with the recent attempts to bring the world “close to our skin” so as to touch it, is that Barthes always underscored the remaining distance between the photographic image and our desires for wholeness. The desire for presence is so strong in the face of loss, of death, and photography conveys *both* this desire and the fact that it cannot be gratified. Photography stokes the desire for fullness or presence, but this also means that the photographic image never satisfies this desire. The photograph points to and accentuates this ambivalence.

Cora Diamond’s recent discussion of Ted Hughes’s poem *Six Men* is helpful here.²⁹ The poem begins with the speaker looking at a photograph of six young men taken forty years before, in 1914:

The celluloid of a photograph holds them well -
Six young men, familiar to their friends.
Four decades that have faded and ochre-tinged
This photograph have not wrinkled the faces or the hands.
Though their cocked hats are not now fashionable,
Their shoes shine. One imparts an intimate smile,
One chews a grass, one lowers his eyes, bashful,
One is ridiculous with cocky pride -
Six months after this picture they were all dead.

The young men, so alive and vibrant in the photograph, held by it, are made present to us in their youthful vitality—a vitality that we know was destroyed. Here is the last stanza of the poem:

That man’s not more alive whom you confront
And shake by the hand, see hale, hear speak loud,
Than any of these six celluloid smiles are,
Nor prehistoric or, fabulous beast more dead;
No thought so vivid as their smoking-blood:
To regard this photograph might well dement,
Such contradictory permanent horrors here
Smile from the single exposure and shoulder out
One’s own body from its instant and heat.

Diamond focuses on the poem because it evinces “the experience of the mind’s not being able to encompass something which it encounters” (44): “It is capable of making one go mad to try, to bring together in thought what cannot be thought:

2008). See my review, “Why Photography Matters to the Theory of History,” *History and Theory*, forthcoming.

28. Eelco Runia, “Burying the Dead, Creating the Past,” *History and Theory* 46, no. 3 (2007) 323.

29. Cora Diamond, “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” in Stanley Cavell *et al.*, *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 43–46. Subsequent references in the text. I am grateful to Kari Weil for calling my attention to this essay. See also Ian Hacking’s comments on the political-national aspects of reading the poem in the same volume, 156–160. The poem can be found in Ted Hughes, “Six Young Men,” in *The Hawk in the Rain* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), 54–55.

the impossibility of anyone's being more alive than these smiling men, nothing being more dead." She calls this a case of the "difficulty of reality," a difficulty, I would suggest, to which photographs expose us in a distinct way. There are language games, she notes, in which this difficulty can be made to vanish. "They were alive when the picture was taken, and then they died. But the picture persists independently of their lives. — What's the problem?" But Diamond wants to abide with the difficulty not to dissolve or deflect it because she thinks that exposure to recalcitrant and paradoxical reality makes us (the viewer of the image, the reader of the poem) more aware of our own entanglement with life and death. "Ted Hughes's poem is about *a single exposure*," she writes, "but the single exposure is *our* exposure, as we find ourselves, or are meant to find, in a shuddering awareness of death and life together" (73). "To regard this photograph might well dement," Hughes wrote, but we need to expose ourselves to this dementia because it is an aspect of the "difficulty of reality."

Hughes is looking back on World War I from the 1950s, but exposures do not only reach backward. The difficulty is not just in trying to understand the life and death of another, but in acknowledging our own prefigured absence. Derrida underscores this point in *Echographies*: "As soon as there is a technology of the image, visibility brings night. . . Because we know that, once it has been taken, captured, this image will be re-producible in our absence, because we know this *already* we are already haunted by this future, which brings our death. Our disappearance is already here."³⁰ The technology of the image goes beyond the technology of writing, of the text. Exposure of our person, the taking of our portrait, or the viewing of the portrait of another, is not the same as making (or discovering) a mark on a page that will persist independently of us. We do not make our photographic images in the same way as we write our texts, or mark another's.

Thus the photographs on which Barthes focused had a different status as trace than do the inscriptions in a book, or even a handwritten diary entry. Barthes was interested in portraits, or at least in photographs of the face of a person, in images that might have conveyed something of the person as a whole, or as he or she really was. He sometimes calls this the "air" of the person. Rather than see this in the metonymic terms of "transfer" recently articulated by Runia, Hayden White's rather idiosyncratic use of the term "synecdoche" seems to capture Barthes's efforts to find the *just* image.³¹ The photographic image that does justice to its subject is one that conveys him or her essentially. Even though it's only an image (we know), the right picture captures the subject "the way the subject really was." This is akin to the synecdoche that refers to a whole not from just any part, but from some essen-

30. Jacques Derrida and Berard Stiegler, *Echographies of Television*, transl. Jennifer Bajorek (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2002), 117. I was alerted to this text by its citation in Carey Wolfe, "Introduction: Exposures" in Cavell *et al.*, *Philosophy and Animal Life*, 31.

31. For White the synecdoche is not just a part substituting for the whole (like metonymy), but also an essential aspect substituting for the whole. See the introduction to *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), especially 34: "With Synecdoche . . . a phenomenon can be characterized by using the part to symbolize some *quality* presumed to inhere in the totality, as in the expression 'He is all heart.' . . . Metaphor is essentially *representational*, Metonymy is *reductionist*, Synecdoche is *integrative*, and Irony is *negational*."

tial (*juste*) attribute. The just picture is a rare picture, indeed. Photographic images, according to Barthes, almost always disappoint, but they also contain something that (unintentionally) pricks one's sensibility, stirs one's heart. This is, of course, the famous *punctum*. The image gives (transfers?) more than "it means to." The stream of photography criticism and theory that flows from Barthes would not label this simply "presence" because what is given is also always absence. No unity, but not merely skepticism about the desire for unity, either.

So, photography "amplifies the rim of ontological uncertainty" by raising questions of presence and temporal disjunction in a mnemonic context of desire and absence. The photographic image calls one to (and perhaps from) the past, while reminding one that the object one beholds is "just an image." The tension between the indexical lure of presence and the representational reminders of absence intensifies the photograph's affective and cognitive value for the beholder.

III. PHOTOGRAPHY'S "ANTHROPOLOGICAL REVOLUTION"

Many of the authors of papers in this issue would accept the notion that the advent of photography introduced decisive changes into our relationship to the past. When Barthes claimed that photography created an "anthropological revolution," he was pointing to how the combination of rapid registration and the widespread distribution of photographic images radically transform what it means to be human.³² This mechanical process promises access to the real (or at least to its trace) but it does so while unsettling our notions of temporal continuity and stability. As Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer show in their essay for this issue, photography's realism produces "incongruous images" that disrupt linear time lines.³³ And as Mary Ann Doane has noted in another context: "The lure of the indexical is linked to its intimate collusion with what Didi-Huberman calls the 'fantasy of referentiality,' with the inert stability of the real, most fully realized in death."³⁴ In the remainder of this essay I will discuss Doane's work on the changing notions of time and meaning in the age of photography and cinema, work that has teased out the anthropological/historical ramifications of the ontological uncertainties discussed above. Finally, I will close with a reminder of what Barthes called the "great mutation" brought on by the enormous distribution of photo-based images: pleasure now passes through the image.

For decades now, several cultural historians have shown how the consciousness of time and history underwent a dramatic shift in the late nineteenth century. Carl E. Schorske and Debora Silverman have shown that in fin-de-siècle Vienna

32. Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image, Music, Text*, transl. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 44.

33. Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, "Incongruous Images: 'Before, During, and After' the Holocaust," *History and Theory, Theme Issue 48* (2009), 9-25, this issue.

34. Mary Ann Doane, "Indexicality and the Concept of Medium Specificity," in Kelsey and Stimson, ed., *The Meaning of Photography*. She is referring to Didi-Huberman's "The Index of the Absent Wound (Monograph on a Stain)," *October* 29 (1984), 63-82. See also his *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, transl. Shane B. Lillis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), and my review "Why Photography Matters to the Theory of History," *History and Theory*, forthcoming.

and Paris a crisis of historicization affected art, architecture, music, and politics.³⁵ Both Stephen Kern and Anson Rabinbach have explored the ways that late-nineteenth-century European culture and society were struggling with changing notions of time that deeply affected the worlds of labor, transportation, literature, and science.³⁶ Jennifer Tucker has made the case that photography in the Victorian period helped shape scientific practices as well as notions of objectivity and truth.³⁷ In *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, Mary Ann Doane has zeroed in on how photography and cinema contributed to “the rationalization of time characterizing industrialization and the expansion of capitalism.”³⁸ Key for Doane is how photography’s indexical powers gravitate toward an inscription of the contingent or the accidental. The ability of photographers to record the accidental is a sign of their realist credentials. They are not choosing subjects whose significance has been established outside the frame; rather, they are there to record *whatever might happen*. “Contingency introduces the element of life and the concrete, but *too much* contingency threatens the crucial representational concept of totality, wholeness. Description is a capitulation to the vast and uncontrollable, and ultimately meaningless, realm of the contingent.”³⁹

Siegfried Kracauer had already noted photography’s gravitational pull toward the meaningless in the 1920s.⁴⁰ The price of its realistic precision and ever-faster exposure times was not only the blindness to duration discussed above, but also the loss of an overall structure of meaning.⁴¹ In this theme issue Robin Kelsey describes chance as a type of “photographic madness” that historians must learn to come to terms with. He has written elsewhere of how the medium’s openness to (and anxieties about) chance have influenced picture-taking since Talbot.⁴²

As photographic image-making becomes both more powerful and more readily available, the relationship to a past with a shared meaning becomes more tenuous. As Doane notes: “The embarrassment of contingency is that it is everywhere and that it everywhere poses the threat of an evacuation of meaning. The concept of the event provides a limit . . . and reinvests the contingent with significance. The contingent is, in effect, harnessed.”⁴³ Doane sees the concept of the event as “on

35. Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1980); Debora Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle Paris: Politics, Psychology, and Style* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

36. Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986); Rabinbach, *The Human Motor*.

37. Jennifer Tucker, *Nature Exposed: Photography as Eyewitness in Victorian Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

38. Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 11.

39. *Ibid.*, 12.

40. Siegfried Kracauer, “Photography,” in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, transl. and ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

41. Doane notes that: “Historical analyses of photography consistently demonstrate photography’s inclination toward the contingent, the particular, the detail. . . . Photographic technology is the automatic, unthinking guarantee of the predilection for the contingent.” Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 142.

42. Robin Kelsey, “Photography, Chance, and *The Pencil of Nature*,” in Kelsey and Stimson, ed., *The Meaning of Photography*.

43. Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 144.

the cusp between contingency and structure, history and theory.”⁴⁴ An event may seem a mere occurrence, just something that happened, but it comes to stand for an occurrence important enough *to be put in relation with other things that have happened* to create a meaningful pattern, a significant diachrony. The concept of the event points not only to something that “just happened” but also to something that fits into a causal or narrative structure. This “fit” is an attempt to compensate for the loss of an immediate (traditional or natural) sense of duration. Events have causes, and they have consequences. They may have been torn from what Bergson saw as a primordial duration, but they are open to (indeed, call for) significance.

Thus the notion of an event maintains singularity while warding off meaninglessness. Chance, to borrow Ian Hacking’s word, is tamed.⁴⁵ “Indexicality is inevitably linked with the singular, the unique, with the imprint of time and all its differentiating force. The project of the cinema in modernity is that of endowing the singular with significance without relinquishing singularity.”⁴⁶ Photography, too, has taken on the project of “endowing the singular with significance without relinquishing singularity.” Indeed, photography’s episodic intensity dialectically seems to call forth a variety of framing devices to provide a context of meaning—the book and the archive being two of the most important in the nineteenth century. “The obsession with indexicality in the nineteenth century,” Doane writes, “is a desire for revivification, for endowing the ‘dead’ past with life.”⁴⁷ Photographers strove to capture the face of death and even to seize images from beyond the grave because they were not just creating representations of the past. They were holding onto, or even resurrecting, traces of what had been thought forever lost.⁴⁸ All of these efforts are part of a new dynamic of living with the past -- and with the passage of time-- while refusing meaninglessness. This dynamic was part of the anthropological revolution precipitated by photography that radically transformed how we connect to our histories.

The “anthropological revolution” stimulated by photography concerns our relationship to our desires as well as to our histories. Toward the end of *Camera Lucida* Barthes wrote that in the aftermath of photography “pleasure passes through the image.”⁴⁹ And not just pleasure. When commenting on how newspaper images of murder victims could be used to incite a thirst for revenge, Nadar already made clear in the mid-nineteenth century that the right pictures could stir public passions in much more powerful ways than even the purple prose of the penny press. “The representation of the corrupted body in all its horrific presence,” Bann notes, “creates irresistible pressure for the death penalty to be carried out on the husband and his accomplices.”⁵⁰ Images with the authority of the trace create the desire for

44. *Ibid.*, 140.

45. Hacking’s work is important to both Doane and Kelsey. See *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

46. Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 208.

47. *Ibid.*, 220.

48. See Michael S. Roth, “Hysterical Remembering,” *Modernism/modernity* 3 (1996) 1-30; Clement Cheroux, *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); and *Brought to Light: Photography and the Invisible, 1840–1900*, ed. Corey Kellor, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

49. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 118.

50. Bann, “‘When I Was a Photographer,’” 103.

death as they produce a vision of crime. Of course, easily disseminated images produce other desires as well; their global circulation serves not only to make viewers aware of (and perhaps open to) varieties of pleasure, but also to promote the codes through which any pleasure will be sought. The images teach us how to love and how to hate; they teach us about our bodies and about the bodies we want. Rather than learning about ourselves and the world by struggling with others for recognition, as Hegel had imagined, we now learn about our own desires through images of pleasure, pain, and possibility.

This “progressive acculturation of the senses” might be said to expand the range of pleasures sought, of desires experienced. But Barthes has a different perspective at the end of *Camera Lucida*. As pleasure now passes through the image, even our most private and perhaps idiosyncratic desires pass through the filter of the conventional—of that which can be circulated. Even the porn shop, he notes, is full of *tableaux vivant*, of worn-out stereotypes. This is the paradox of the photograph’s realism. By depicting the world so faithfully, photography has given us a world in which we live as-if-we-are-to-be-pictured. No camera, no experience; no image, no idea of how to be in the world. Our memories, which photography initially seemed to support, have now been replaced by photographic images of the past. Just as people who now use their GPS for even minor trips lose the ability to find their way around town, with the triumph of photography’s capturing events of the past we can no longer find our way in history—no longer navigate within our own personal memories—without the filter of photo-like images. The triumph of the photographic means the past has become accessible, but only accessible in image-like terms. Even Runia’s attempt to get the presence close to the skin, his “storehouse of presence,” resembles a photo archive.

We have returned to the theme of the cost of photography with which we began this essay. Initially, we considered the blindness to duration as the result of photographic precision. Now we encounter the blindness to our own desires, which Barthes characterizes as the loss of authenticity, as the price of photographic ubiquity. These forms of blindness, however, are not so much disabilities to be overcome as they are aspects of modern consciousness to be acknowledged. The challenges of perceiving duration or of recognizing one’s desires cannot be wished away. Photographs have become part of our reality. The engagement with photography’s impact on historical consciousness gives rise to reconsiderations of temporal extension and to the difficulties of acknowledging one’s desires in an increasingly open and fractured social field. The medium’s indexical stain, its frightening specificity, its staggering reproducibility, and the ease with which it travels give rise to photographic ambivalence. As with other forms of ambivalence, we should be less concerned with diluting its constitutive tensions than with learning to live with its conflicted possibilities.