

Affecting Art: Barthes, Kertész, and Lacan

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Precariously poised at the unstable nexus of epistemology and aesthetics, the photographic image provokes enduring critical debate. For some critics, such as Rudolf Arnheim, Anne Beattie, Janet Malcolm, and Andy Grundberg the photograph's "accidental" features provide its distinctive link to reality. For Arnheim, for example, the photograph "embraces accident, since not everything in the lens' view can be controlled...Its imperfection is a sign of the victory of reality over the artist's efforts."¹ In this view the accidental elements testify to the photograph's indexical relationship to reality, nudging it towards the side of epistemology with its claims to nature, objectivity, documentation, and transparency.

Other critics have explored ways in which the presence of an unintended or accidental detail prods the photograph in the opposite direction, away from epistemology and in the direction of the aesthetic—the domain of culture, subjective experience, fiction, and representational codes. For example, historians of science Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison recall that in early scientific uses of photography, the inclusion of uncontrollable or accidental details marked a limitation to photography's claim to accuracy. Intrusions of quirky and unexpected imperfections into the photographic image, although objectively "true," inaccurately represented the characteristics of the subject matter. Daston and Galison explain, "the sacrifice of resemblance was more than justified by the immediacy of the machine-made images of nature that eliminated the meddlesome intervention of humans."² Furthermore, rather than evacuate the influence of the photographer, these inclusions were taken as testaments to the photographer's character; they functioned culturally as signifiers of his "disciplined self-denial of the temptation to perfect."³ In this case, the artists' aspirations to ethical and even aesthetic distinction overwhelm the randomness of nature.

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Paradoxically, this refusal in the name of truth to "correct" accidental features arising from limitations of the mechanical apparatus to produce appropriate contours, colors, and textures, further impelled the photograph toward the aesthetic and the cultural. The very fact that early photographs, riddled with profound imperfections, could function as the prime symbol of truth underscores the photograph's status as a heavily negotiated cultural form. Photographs do not simply bear a greater resemblance to their subject matter than other forms of representation. Rather, as John Tagg contends, the "photograph's status as evidence and record (like its status as Art) had to be produced and negotiated to be established."⁴ Knowledge of photographic representational codes is necessary in order for photographs to achieve their ideological function as transparent "messages without a code" precisely *because of* their limitations and not in spite of them. Photographs, as Daston and Galison tell us, "carry the stamp of the real only to eyes that have been taught the conventions...of that brand of realism."⁵

Roland Barthes' posthumously published meditation on the photograph, *Camera Lucida*, enters this debate at a critical juncture. Barthes contemplates a type of photographic accident, that he calls the *punctum*, which complicates the traditional accounts of the photograph's engagement with both epistemology (nature) and aesthetics (culture). For Barthes, the *punctum* is a concrete, seemingly ordinary detail within the photograph, which due to contingent

metonymic associations, takes on unexplained resonances. The presence of this accidental detail gestures towards an aleatory meaning which overreaches the image. As Barthes recounts, “the photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).”⁶ The *punctum*, although unintentional, unplanned, unpredictable and uncoded, does not exist exclusively on the side of nature, however. Rather the *punctum* “*de-naturalizes*,” the image, making what seemed ordinary appear suddenly strange or uncanny, *unheimlich* in the Freudian sense. Nor does the *punctum* link the photograph to culture in any straightforward way. Rather the *punctum* disrupts, indeed *violates* the culturally coded and expecting reading, the *studium*. I shall argue

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that, as conceived by Barthes, the *punctum* points “beyond” both nature and culture, to their inevitable impossibility, to what Jacques Lacan calls the domain of the “Real,” anxiety provoking anomalies in the order of symbolic representations.

Rather than associate such symbolic ruptures with trauma, Barthes’ formulation of the *punctum* foregrounds Lacan’s point that often seemingly trivial or insignificant objects or events trigger these flashes of the Real. We are often most disturbed not so much by events or objects themselves, but rather by a palpable sense of their hauntingly indistinct threat. Paul Verhaeghe captures this characteristic of the Real as what is “just waiting around the corner, unseen, unnamed, but very present... (just think of the nightmare: we are awakened a split second before we would see or experience ‘it’).”⁷ I suggest that the accident of the *punctum* produces precisely such an effect.

Kertész: The Accidental Purist?

Throughout *Camera Lucida* Barthes distinguishes André Kertész’s photographs as exemplary of the phenomenon of the *punctum*. I will primarily discuss three of Kertész’s photographs: the first two intervene in debates regarding Barthes’ forms of realism; the last image, I will argue, engages Lacan’s category of the Real. Kertész’s work, spanning about seventy years (1914-1980) and three major cities (Budapest, Paris, New York), combined with his provocative remarks, sharpen questions regarding the photographic accident and its relationship to both nature and culture. Kertész’s images embody the tension between the random event (the natural) and the carefully composed scene (the cultural), a theme explored with particular piquancy in his narration of “Landing Pigeon”(New York, 1960), which depicts, with exceptional formal acuity, the descent of a single pigeon onto a decaying tenement. The line of the pigeon seems to complete the composition of the photograph as if choreographed and yet it appears only as a contingency. On the one hand, this coincidence, which occurs within the world pictured by the photograph, contributes to the impression of realism described by Arnheim—an occurrence in the “lens’ view” which is beyond the artist’s control. On the other hand,

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Figure 1
“Landing Pigeon” 1960

the aesthetic precision of this image complies with the conventions of modernism, contaminating nature with stains of culture.

Kertész, himself, struggled with this tension throughout his career. On the one hand, he is aware of his position as an “auteur” within an emerging modernism that privileges autonomy and interpretation. On the other hand, he is reluctant to abandon photography’s epistemological claims to truth. Kertész attempts to resolve this tension by steadfastly insisting that he “captures” rather than “arranges” his scenes, and then struggling to explain the paradoxical juxtaposition of the chance moment with the thoughtfully planned scene. As he explains in regard to “Landing Pigeon:”

The original idea for this photograph dates back to my days in Paris [1925-1936]....Here in New York I sat and waited. Time and time again I went back....Then one day I saw the lonely pigeon....I had waited maybe thirty years for that instant.⁸

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How can we understand Kertész's struggle here? Drawing upon Barthes' distinction between "aesthetic" realism and "referential" realism developed in "The Reality Effect," I suggest that for Kertész "aesthetic constraints are steeped—at least as an alibi—in referential constraints."⁹ In other words, Kertész struggles to bring together two forms of realism: on the one hand, "aesthetic realism," in which seemingly "insignificant" details become meaningful not through their conformity to a preexisting, spontaneous reality, but instead through their compliance with the "cultural rules of representation," (as in pseudo documentaries like the *Blair Witch Project*); and on the other hand, "referential realism," in which details matter simply because they attest to "what really happened" (a mode of representation that Barthes associates most closely with the medium of photography).

For Barthes, the effort to hold *together* these two modes of realism carries considerable advantage. On the one hand, by demanding conformity to cultural convention, the constraint of the "aesthetic function" works to limit the potentially endless "vertigo of notation."¹⁰ On the other hand, "pretending to follow...in a submissive fashion" the referential logic of realism protects a representation against attacks of mere "fantasmatic activity."¹¹ In short, when held in tension with the appeal to the aesthetic function, the constraint of the referential function leads not to a justification for displaying an inexhaustible array of details, but rather, to the necessity of finding, "a new reason to describe."¹²

One way in which Kertész may be seen as contributing to and anticipating this Barthesian quest is by breaking down an implicit opposition underlying the discourses of both aesthetic and referential realism—the assumption of the "objective" as "accurate," and of the "subjective" as "deceptive." For Kertész, an accurate depiction of reality often involves artistic manipulation. Unlike the nineteenth century scientific illustrators who would, in Daston and Gallison's words, "sacrifice resemblance" for the sake of objectivity, Kertész would rather impose his artistic sensibility on the world to reveal a deeper "truth." His "reason to describe" emerges, not from an eagerness

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to subvert realism, but from an aspiration to convey reality more accurately.

Kertész most directly expresses this view when describing his encounter with the unionized production team of the American Ballet, for whom he had been hired to do a photographic shoot. In recalling his outrage at being prevented from hanging his own "primitive" lights, Kertész invokes a conception of both the photograph and the photographer that recalls the view of eighteenth century scientific atlas makers (as well as some of their skeptical nineteenth-century counterparts) about whom Daston and Galison write. In this view, without the intervention of a master to prevent their deception, even the most technically perfect photographs (and before that, the images of the camera obscura) risk unreliability. Thus, for Kertész, the American studio system compromises the photograph's integrity by interfering with

the photographer's special skill at *creating* "honest" images. Kertész, therefore, twists the usual formula of equating mechanical objectivity with truth, and human intervention with deception, when he claims "of course a picture can lie, but only if you...don't have enough control over your subject. Then it is the camera working, not you."¹³

In the second image I will discuss in terms of debates surrounding realism, "Broken Plate" (Paris 1929), Kertész presents us with a different type of photographic accident. Rather than a coincidence within the world that is photographed (as in "Landing Pigeon"), in this image we see an accident that occurs within the photographic apparatus itself. In "Broken Plate," a panorama of Montmartre is shattered by the intrusion of a splintering hole just left of its center, caused by a cracked lens plate. Kertész left most of his negatives in Paris when he left for America in 1936, due in part to France's changing political climate in which his work was frequently co-opted in the service of France's increasing nationalism. Upon his return to Paris many years later, he discovered that sixty percent of his glass plates were broken. Kertész claims to have disposed of the damaged negatives, with the exception of this one, which he printed, explaining that "an accident helped me to produce a beautiful effect."¹⁴

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Figure 2
"Broken Plate" 1929

What role does this “accident” play in the photograph’s relation to realism? On the one hand, the photograph’s transparency is destroyed by an overt display of a sign of its process of production. By interrupting the autonomy of the represented scene, the conspicuousness of the photographic mechanism *undermines* the image’s claims to a transparent or “referential realism.” On the other hand, within a modernist aesthetic, inclusions of intentional reminders of the process of photographic production encode images as documentary or “realist” so that cracked lenses, unfocused images, and irregular camera angles lend images an impression of an “aesthetic realism.” At yet another level, however, the detail of the crack *attests* to a referential realism; it is a sign of something that “really” happened. As such, it is at once both a stylistic indicator of the realist aesthetic, as well as a testament of “what has been”—the “reality” of the broken lens, which carries a material reminder of the real political conditions which the image endured.

Through his narration of “New York City” (1979), Kertész presents us with yet a third distinct type of photographic accident, one I associate with the coincidence that Barthes calls the *punctum*. This type of accident, I shall argue, moves us away from questions of realism, into the realm of the Lacanian Real. At the center of this image we see, resting upon a vase, a glass bust through which a distorted view of



Figure 3
“New York City” 1979

New York City emerges. The coincidence occurs neither in the world photographed nor in the mechanisms of the photograph's production, but rather in Kertész's attraction to the bust, which he explains moved him “because it resembled my wife—the shoulder and the neck were Elizabeth,” who had recently died. After months of being haunted by the bust, Kertész purchases it and photographs it on the windowsill of the New York apartment that he and Elizabeth shared for 24 years, resulting in this image that one art historian distinguishes as “among the most delicately wrought images of mourning in art¹⁵.” The enormous, but nebulous, significance which this image carries for Kertész (who as a *viewer* of the image, expressed surprise at how deeply it moved him) can be explored through a deeply pregnant chain of associations which link Kertész to this image. Before discussing these, however, I need to differentiate my own approach from more conventional psychoanalytic approaches to analyzing texts.

My analysis opposes what Howard Risatti refers to as “psychosociological” or “psychobiographical” approaches to art which use an artist's biography and history to arrive at insights regarding the meaning of a work of art.¹⁶ Such approaches

employ psychoanalysis as a hermeneutic tool to uncover hidden meanings with an aim to “discover the [agency of the] Author...beneath the work.”¹⁷ Barthes, himself, in “The Death of the Author” warns against such projects that “grant the greatest importance to the author’s person,” by privileging the Author as the text’s final signified.¹⁸ But since analyses that attempt to trace the *punctum* necessarily involve consultation with historical and biographical material, they flirt dangerously with such approaches. How can a Barthesian approach protect itself against such accusations of resuscitating the importance of the author? By emphasizing that the *punctum* is an irruption of “nonmeaning”—a seemingly insignificant accident—Barthes insulates the *punctum* from any question of the author’s conscious intentions and meanings. Thus emphasis upon the *punctum* enables us to implement Barthes’ suggestion that one way to “cast the Author into doubt and derision” is to emphasize the “accidental nature of his activity.”¹⁹ Such accidents, which appear to viewers as insignificant or superfluous details, confront us with the central question that occupies Barthes in “The Reality Effect:” “what is ultimately...the significance of insignificance[s]?”²⁰

“New York City” presents the viewer with an opportunity to explore such a “significant insignificance.” The analysis that I suggest requires that we shift our attention away from the clearly significant *bust*, and toward the seemingly insignificant *vase*, upon which the glass bust rests. The vase seems, in Lacan’s words, to be “out of place in the picture.” It serves only the banal function of raising the bust to a more prominent height. The formal “insignificance” of the vase becomes conspicuous, however, when considered in relation to the aesthetic precision that generally characterizes Kertész’ work. “Superfluous,” or “insignificant” details (due to their lack of stylistic or metaphoric implication) are often presumed to most straightforwardly denote a concrete reality. Yet, like the *punctum*, these “unintelligible” ordinary, concrete details function as symbolic interruptions, taking on an uncanny quality. (And here I distinguish Lacan’s notion of the gaze from Barthes’ notion of the *punctum*. Whereas the gaze appears as a

vague, indeterminate, enigmatic blur, disrupting the visual field and functions as an instantiation of the *objet petit a*, I suggest that the *punctum*, like these concrete, but meaningless details, derives its logic from the object that Lacan designates as the “signifier of lack in the Other.” Barthes, implicitly distances his notion of the *punctum* from Lacan’s concept of the gaze when he tells us of an image containing for him a *punctum*: “this photograph which I pick out and which I love has nothing in common with the shiny point which sways before your eyes and makes your head swim.”²¹)

Rather than clearly representing reality, these “meaningless” details signal an intrusion of what amounts to the Lacanian Real. As Barthes explains: “these details...say nothing but this: *we are the real*; it is the category of ‘the real’ (and not its contingent contents) which is then signified.”²²

To examine Barthes’ claim that these details evoke the real, one can explore a cluster of contingent associations which accumulate around the “out-of-placeness” of the vase in “New York City.” The vase’s significance emerges not simply through the “meanings” that, as we will see, it carries for Kertész, but through its formal place within the image. If Kertész had produced an image in which the vase conformed to aesthetic conventions, although it might still carry vast

personal importance for him, it would merely carry what Barthes calls the *studium* (a purely conventional representational element). The vase arises as a *punctum* through its surprising, “accidental” quality. But whereas in “Landing Pigeon,” the “accident” remains only at the level of the *studium* (since the coincidence lies precisely in the *belongingness* of the contingent pigeon to the modernist aesthetic), in “New York City,” by contrast, the vase evokes the *punctum* through its disruption of the formal composition; the *punctum* “sticks out” precisely because it does *not belong*.

In other words, our interest in the *punctum* lies not in its content, but rather in its form. The *punctum* functions similarly to the Freudian notion of a dream detail. As Slavoj Žižek describes, a dream detail, “*in itself* is usually quite insignificant...but...*with regard to its structural position* denatures the scene...renders the whole picture strange and uncanny.”²³

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It follows that analysts of the *punctum* must follow Freud’s technique of dream analysis, and avoid being lured by the “fetishistic fascination of the ‘content’ supposedly hidden behind the form.”²⁴ The significance of dreams lies not in their ability to articulate a deep, hidden unconscious message that is too ghastly for the conscious mind to bear. On the contrary, Žižek contends, if we proceed to excavate the manifest content of dreams for their seamy latent meaning, we are “doomed to disappointment: all we find is some entirely ‘normal’—albeit unpleasant—thought.”²⁵ This thought appears in hidden form in a dream, not because it cannot be articulated consciously, but because it attaches to other unconscious, repressed fragments with which it associates on the level of the signifier. One can often speak fluently about a traumatic experience, yet remain unaware of how the trauma has organized one’s psychic economy. According to Žižek, “the ‘secret,’ to be unveiled...is not the content hidden behind the form...but, on the contrary, *the ‘secret’ of this form itself.*”²⁶

Rather than imply that there is a “deeper meaning” *behind* the dream detail, I follow Freud in turning this around by saying that it is precisely in the *meaninglessness* of these superficial details that the void at the heart of our subjectivity is articulated. Meaning does not *cause* or motivate these details, but rather meaning is the *result* of contingent psychic attachments to meaningless details.

Although such details may be the result of idiosyncratic associations, they can be nonetheless general in their *effects*—as New York City resonated so strongly for not only Kertész himself, but also his viewers. This has been one of the lessons of art controversies such as those surrounding the work of Robert Mapplethorpe. Even though no one else may share Mapplethorpe’s particular cluster of psychic and social associations, his images nonetheless strike diverse viewers similarly in provoking unrealistic anxieties. In “Man in Polyester Suit,” for example, as viewers we may be struck by the distinct gap between the “High Art” form and the “pornographic” content without concerning ourselves with the particular idiosyncratic associations that may further shape our reactions to the picture.

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This tension between form and content deserves further comment. If, in “Man in Polyester Suit,” we restrict attention to the penis as the element of disturbance, then all we find is a point of symbolic transgression—a purely conventional, explicable “shock”—characteristic of

the *studium*²⁷. If, by contrast, we focus on the bit of underwear fabric peaking out from the fly of the trousers, we are unlikely to be “shocked.” Rather we are “surprised.” We wonder what it is doing there, since it steps outside any available set of symbolic codes. A similar surprise greets the viewer who attends to the vase rather than the bust in Kertész’s photograph, “New York City.”

Such gaps between form and content often provoke viewers to witness a disruption in the field of symbolic representation. Such intrusions of meaningless or insignificant fragments of the Real shatter the possibility of *any* “complacent immersion in the socio-symbolic reality.”²⁸ Viewers are provoked to respond to these points of symbolic dissolution, through which a piece of the Real flashes before them. The point is not that all of us *will* respond uniformly, but that viewers *tend* to respond in surprisingly similar ways; the gap between form and content tends to produce similar *effects*, *despite* the absence of uniformity in the particular associations that give rise to these effects. (The different ways in which subjects respond to this symbolic rupture—for example, by trying to understand or cover over the gap or by exploring and inhabiting the gap—is suggested by Lacan’s strategies of imposture and masquerade—to which I return at the end). How, then, does all of this illuminate the significance of the uncharacteristic formal appearance of the vase upon which the bust rests in “New York City?”

In 1925 Kertész moved from Hungary to Paris where he knew virtually no one, had no job, and could barely speak French. Within a year he had developed a group of friends which led to his introduction to the painter Piet Mondrian in 1926 who agreed to let Kertész photograph him and his studio. Kertész, initially struck most strongly by Mondrian’s perfectly symmetrical compositions, noticed upon studying the photographs he had taken what art historian Sandra Phillips describes as “telling deviations from Mondrian’s precise geometry.”²⁹

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Of particular interest to Kertész was Mondrian’s “aspiration to order and the slight and human divergences from it.”³⁰ Particularly memorable, however, were Mondrian’s moustache, which Kertész observed had been trimmed to a slight angle in order to compensate for an asymmetry within his physiognomy, as well as a vase housing an artificial flower which, juxtaposed with the “insistent angularities” of Mondrian’s studio, seemed “antithetical to the artist’s painting.”³¹ The out-of-place quality of this vase has subsequently captured the attention of many observers. Mondrian, as described by his close friend and fellow painter Michel Seuphor, “so strongly fe[lt] the lack of a woman in his daily life that he always kept a flower—an artificial flower suggesting a feminine presence—in the round vase standing on the hall table of his studio.”³²

Memories of this visit remained vivid to Kertész for the remainder of his life. Phillips credits the enormous impact of Kertész’ encounter “with the most important figure in abstract painting in Paris” with setting Kertész “on a new course,” leading him to what she describes as a “new formalism” evident by his increasing attention to “the detail” as “both an abstraction and a kind of document.”³³

In this light, one can reevaluate the role of the vase in “New York City.” The vase, which appears, at first glance, to be nothing more than a mere pedestal for the display of the sublime object (the uncanny embodiment of the figure of Elizabeth) begins to resonate beyond its function. On the one hand, the vase *links* the grieving Kertész with the melancholic Mondrian (who misses the woman he never had), yet on the other hand, the vase’s placement in the composition *undermines* the importance of Mondrian’s meticulous attention to precision and

detail. Put in other terms, the vase, at the level of *content*, carries a metonymic association to the inspirational Mondrian and yet, at the level of *form*, marks a subversion of his artistic influence. In this gap between content and form, “the form articulates the ‘repressed’ truth of the content.” As Žižek describes, by “keeping the content at a distance from the form, the ‘repressed’ truth of the content finds room to articulate itself.”³⁴ The antagonism between form and content serves

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“as the unmistakable signal of the presence of some traumatic repressed content.”³⁵

One can speculate that the “repressed truth,” articulated in the dissonance between the form and the content of the vase is connected with Kertész’s history through the following associations. During his first migration from Budapest to Paris, Kertész began to experiment with avant-garde techniques, gaining particular recognition for his series of “Distortions.” In these images, Kertész used a warped mirror through which he photographed nude Parisian women he had met from within his newly burgeoning circle of acquaintances. These Distortions, constituting the only nudes in his published work, were made at the end of his only period of separation from his wife, Elizabeth, during their forty-four year relationship. The Distortions reached their peak in 1933, the same year that witnessed both the death of his mother and (according to many biographers) his marriage to Elizabeth, as well as the publication of his first book, which he dedicated to both his mother and Elizabeth.

Ambiguity surrounding his marriage to Elizabeth further enriches the complexities of this period for Kertész. His published work suggests a romantic narrative of Elizabeth and himself as passionate young lovers in Budapest, separated for a brief but seemingly interminable period while he went to Paris, only to be reunited and married shortly after. Kertész continually confirmed this impression through interviews. Yet, as Charles Hagen points out, “fifteen years elapsed before they got back together in Paris” and during this time Kertész had married another woman, photographer Rosza Klein, a marriage which, according to David Travis, he publicly “pretended never happened.”³⁶ Kertész’s inability to integrate this first marriage into his self-narrative manifests in profound silences. Travis tells us that, when asked about Klein, Kertész replied, “I think she was a photographer in Paris.”³⁷

Through the logic of what Freud calls *Nachträglichkeit* one can think about how the absence of Kertész’s first marriage from his symbolic framework sets the scene for the loss of Elizabeth decades before her actual death. In the temporal status of the subject, the repressed, as noted by Žižek and Hal

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Foster, “always returns from the future.” *Nachträglichkeit*, described by Foster as “deferred action,” provides a way of understanding the “psychic temporality of the subject” as “a *complex relay of anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts...that throws over any simple scheme of before and after, cause and effect, origin and repetition.*”³⁸ The traumatic event (in this case, the death of Elizabeth) becomes uncanny, since, as Žižek explains, “before it actually happened, there was already a place opened, reserved for it in fantasy-space” (in this case by the symbolic vacancy of his first wife).³⁹ Trauma, like the photograph more generally, follows the logic of the future anterior: it indicates that, “at a certain future moment, something will have already taken place.”⁴⁰ In exactly this way, the historic and structuring absence of Kertész’s first wife

designates and holds open an empty place for the event of Elizabeth's death years later to inhabit. This void marks the Real—the traumatic “nothing” around which the symbolic is structured. The accident of the *punctum*, in this case embodied in the seemingly insignificant vase, materializes this constitutive lack.

Kertész's work, perhaps through its own structure of *Nachträglichkeit*, both advances and awaits Barthes' project. Kertész's images achieve, at a concrete level, Barthes' theoretical project to upset the traditional opposition of nature and culture. In a 1928 review, Pierre Bost attributed to Kertész's images “a certain concreteness and personality, yet a strangeness despite their familiarity,” a description that eerily recalls our account of the *punctum*.⁴¹ Thus we see that an analysis of the accident of the *punctum* leads not only to a richer account of Kertész's work, but also to an important site at which deep theoretical connections can be made between Barthes and Lacan, which in turn carry implications, not just for questions of photographic realism, but also for psychoanalytic approaches to theories of the image. Such approaches, it is important to recognize, do not violate Barthes' “death of the author” thesis. Rather they show the way in which, by exploring anomalies between form and content, psychoanalytic theories of the image can be articulated with a more detailed approach that pays

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due attention to the idiosyncratic associations through which individual viewers flesh out such tensions.

Finally, I will end by saying just a bit about the larger context for this investigation. This paper was motivated in part by the recent attacks on Lacanian psychoanalysis within film theory and visual studies, embodied most vigorously, perhaps by David Bordwell and Noel Carroll's “post-theory” thesis. Bordwell and Carroll call for the end of “grand Theory,” which they characterize as the psychoanalytic, specifically Lacanian, approaches that dominated film scholarship since the 1970s. Such work, they claim, suffers from a formulaic methodology in which films are used merely to confirm the workings of a specific theoretical position. In its place they propose cognitivist/historicist and empirical approaches which, they argue, are better attuned to address questions raised by specific filmic and cultural events. Whereas “grand Theory,” in their formulation, performs from the top downwards (in applying a theory to a text), “post-theorists” tout their approaches as “piece-meal,” “middle-range,” and “problem-driven.”⁴²

Rather than reject theory in toto (as post-theorists suggest—naturalizing their implicitly theoretical frameworks), I suggest that we seek to contribute to the revitalization of theory, especially psychoanalytic theory, within film and visual studies. I propose a theoretical approach that, rather than simply advocate a broad Theory for Theory's sake, is not only sensitive to but also motivated by particular historical, political, cultural, and textual questions. In particular, a focus on the *punctum* provides a way of highlighting the importance of the strongly contextual and profoundly local dimension necessary for film theoretical approaches that can meet the challenges posed by contemporary film and visual culture studies. In keeping these closing remarks brief I will focus upon just two points of disagreement with Post-theory views: Firstly, although I share with these scholars the concern that film theory from the 1970s and 1980s was fraught with many problems, I disagree with the reasons they cite. Rather than criticize this work for taking a global theoretical approach, I take issue with

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its selective and oversimplified interpretation of psychoanalytic theory.

In parsing out deep connections between Barthes and Lacan, I make a case for Barthes' engagement with the Lacanian Real which critics persistently overlook. A similar oversight pervades much film theory scholarship, most notably the influential and foundational work of Christian Metz and Jean Louis Comolli. In particular, in "engaging with" Lacan, these film theorists emphasize Lacan's notion of the Imaginary to the virtual exclusion of his concept of the Real. This omission manifests in, among other things, a limited notion of the spectator. Specifically, a focus on the Imaginary allows us to consider how images provide points with which spectators can identify. An emphasis on the Lacanian Real, enables the supplementary understanding of these points as places where the image's meaning breaks down. Thus, here, I share with Bordwell the concern that film theory's emphasis on "Imaginary identification with a point of coherence" risks "guarantee[ing] the illusion of reality and of a fully present subject."⁴³

How would a shift in focus from the Imaginary to the Real operate in an analysis of Kertész's photograph, "New York City?" When working solely within the framework of the Imaginary, one can explicate the *bust* as provisionally engaging viewers to identify with an image of Woman, whereas consideration of the Real, by contrast, helps us to think about how the *vase* (the point of symbolic failure) may mobilize the spectator to look *as* Woman—to confront "not just what we see but how we see—[to conceive of] visual space as more than the domain of simple recognition."⁴⁴

In Parveen Adams' terms, "it is not the image of woman as such that is crucial, but how the image organizes the way in which the [it] is looked at."⁴⁵

It is thus through the notion of the Real that we can begin to think fresh connections between the image and sexual difference. A prick by the *punctum* launches the spectator into the looming shadow of the Real, thus causing dire uncertainty regarding not only where the spectator "stands in relation to the

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picture," but also regarding her/his sexual identity. Such visual disturbances provide subjects with a sinking feeling that, to quote Jacqueline Rose, "our identities as male or female, our confidence in language as true or false, and our security in the image we judge as perfect or flawed, are fantasies."⁴⁶

Subversive political potential resides in responding to these moments of disruption through the position Lacan ascribes to Woman, rather than through the position he designates to Man. "Woman" and "Man" in this context, refer not to biological categories, nor to their cultural overlays, but instead to the two positions that a subject can take in response to the failure of the symbolic system to confer an identity. For Freud and Lacan, sex, like the visual disturbances of the gaze and the *punctum*, emerges from this limit of representation. As Joan Copjec puts it, sex comes into being "only where discursive practices falter—and not at all where they succeed in producing meaning."⁴⁷

When viewers "come up against a...point of the [visual] system...[that] fails to integrate itself," the scopical strategy of Man—what Lacan calls display or imposture—entails the attempt to "refuse that moment...by trying to run away from it or by binding it back into the logic and perfection of the [visual] system itself."⁴⁸ Such efforts yield reactionary results by reinscribing antagonism back into the symbolic order. The viewing position of Woman—what Lacan calls masquerade—,by contrast, carries subversive potential in that it undermines the system's

coherence, by inhabiting, rather than concealing, its points of lack and excess. In this sense Woman provides a structural model upon which a subversive political practice may be based.

My second point of disagreement dovetails with the first; it concerns “Post-theory’s” claims that, because of its focus upon “exceptional” phenomena, psychoanalysis is only useful as a last resort, when all other explanations have been exhausted. As Bordwell puts it, psychoanalysis is “restricted to dealing with phenomena that cannot be explained by other means . . . where we have a convincing cognitivist account, there

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is no point whatsoever in looking any further for a psychoanalytic account.”⁴⁹

Rather than take explanations at face value, psychoanalysis prods the theorist to think beyond apparently satisfactory narratives. Psychoanalysis greets with due suspicion the narratives and explanations that appear exhaustive; the illusion of closure often derives from psychic efforts to claim mastery over events that threaten (and with good reason) our ability to understand them.

A theoretical approach at its best derives from a dialectical relation between theory and example. Carroll implores contemporary film theorists to “become more conscious of [their] dialectical responsibilities . . . [in order to avoid] the ever-present danger that theoretical premises will be taken as given.”⁵⁰ Yet, if we follow Žižek, Carroll’s own version of a dialectics falls short of achieving a “dialectics proper” in which “the subject’s position of enunciation is included, inscribed, into the process.”⁵¹ Carroll, Žižek claims, in advocating an “apparently modest proposition” (of drawing theoretical conclusions from thorough empirical research) in fact takes a “much more immoderate position of enunciation of the post-theorist himself/herself as the observer exempted from the object of his/her study.”⁵²

Žižek suggests that a “dialectics proper” must avoid taking up the “arrogant position of enunciation . . . of . . . assuming the capacity to compare a theory with ‘real life.’”⁵³ The dialectically engaged theorist must look at a system, not as a closed body of thought, but as an entity whose apparent closure is guaranteed only through its exception. In Lacan’s work the exception is expressed as the *pas tout* (‘not all’), the exclusion around which a system coheres. As Rose describes, a “system is constituted as system or whole only as a function of what it is attempting to evade.”⁵⁴ Woman, within Lacanian theory functions as the very *pas tout* of the symbolic system. As Joan Copjec explains, “it is only by refusing to deny—or confirm—her existence that ‘normative and exclusionary’ thinking can be avoided. That is, it is only by acknowledging that a concept of woman . . . is structurally impossible within the

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symbolic order, that each historical construction of her can be challenged.”⁵⁵

It is thus fitting, in theory no less than in politics, that scholars should proceed from Woman’s strategy of the masquerade in implicating and inscribing ourselves as subjects within the very structures we weave, rather than follow, as Bordwell and Carroll do, the logic of Man’s imposture by attempting to master a system from the outside.

Endnotes

¹ Wendy Steiner, *The Scandal of Pleasure: Art in an Age of Fundamentalism*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.): 40.

² Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison. "The Image of Objectivity," *Representations* 40 (1992): 17.

³ Ibid. 115.

⁴ John Tagg. *The Burden of Representation*. (London: Macmillan, 1987.): 6.

⁵ Daston et al., 93.

⁶ Roland Barthes. *Camera Lucida*. (Trans. Richard Howard, London: Vintage, 1980) 27.

⁷ Paul Verhaeghe. *Beyond Gender: From Subject to Drive*. (New York: Other Press, 2001) 12.

⁸ Andrè Kertész. *Kertész on Kertész*. (Addeville Press, 1985) 100.

⁹ Roland Barthes. "The Reality Effect." *Image-Music-Text*. (Trans. Stephen Heath, New York: Noonday Press, 1988) 145.

¹⁰ Ibid 145.

¹¹ Ibid 145.

¹² Ibid 145.

¹³ Kertész, 80.

¹⁴ Ibid. 72.

¹⁵ Sandra S. Phillips et al. *Andrè Kertész: Of Paris and New York*. (New York: Art Institute of Chicago and the New York Metropolitan Museum, 1985) 196.

¹⁶ Howard Risatti (ed.) *Postmodern Perspectives: Issues in Contemporary Art*. (Prentice Hall, 1997).

¹⁷ Roland Barthes. "The Death of the Author." *Image-Music-Text*. (Trans. Stephen Heath, New York: Noonday Press, 1988) 50.

¹⁸ Ibid. 50.

¹⁹ Ibid. 50.

²⁰ Barthes, "The Reality Effect," 143.

²¹ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 18-19.

²² Ibid. 148.

²³ Slavoj Žižek. *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*. (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991) 53.

²⁴ Ibid. 11.

²⁵ Ibid. 12.

²⁶ Ibid. 11.

²⁷ Since the “shock” rests on the penis’s unexpected appearance, viewers equipped with appropriate artistic cultural capital would likely find this utterly predictable.

²⁸ Slavoj Žižek. *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski Between Theory and Post-Theory*. (London: BFI Publishing, 2001) 123.

²⁹ Phillips, et al. *Andrè Kertész*, 31.

³⁰ Ibid. 31.

³¹ Ibid. 31.

³² Ibid. 31.

³³ Ibid. 32.

³⁴ Slavoj Žižek. *Plague of Fantasies*. (London: Verso, 1997) 188.

³⁵ Ibid. 189.

³⁶ Phillips, et al., *Andrè Kertész*, 120.

³⁷ Ibid. 120.

³⁸ Hal Foster. *Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*. (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996) 28-29.

³⁹ Slavoj Žižek. *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989) 69.

⁴⁰ Bruce Fink. *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) 64.

⁴¹ Sandra Phillips, et al., *Andrè Kertész*, 36.

⁴² David Bordwell and Noel Coward Eds. *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*. (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996.) 2.

⁴³ Ibid. 16.

⁴⁴ Jacqueline Rose. *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*. (London: Verso, 1986.) 231.

⁴⁵ Parveen Adams. *Emptiness of the Image: Psychoanalysis and Sexual Difference*. (London: Routledge, 1995.) 2.

⁴⁶ Rose, 227.

⁴⁷ Joan Copjec. *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*. (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1994.) 204.

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⁴⁸ Ibid. 219.

⁴⁹ David Bordwell. 65.

⁵⁰ Noel Carrol. 57.

⁵¹ Žižek, *Fright of Real Tears* 15.

⁵² Ibid. 16.

⁵³ Ibid. 16.

⁵⁴ Rose 219.

⁵⁵ Copjec 224.

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