Arresting beauty, framing evidence: An inquiry into photography and the teaching of writing

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ARRESTING BEAUTY, FRAMING EVIDENCE:
AN INQUIRY INTO PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE TEACHING OF WRITING

BY

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DISSERTATION

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[Signatures of committee members]

Date: May 08, 2009
DEDICATION

For Sequoyah, who missed many days of playing catch so this work could be completed.
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Many thanks to my committee for their time and thoughtfulness in responding to this writing. From day one, Tom helped me stay mindful of the pragmatic needs of writing teachers, Lisa pushed me to think more deeply about making photographs and arguments, Paula nurtured my explorations of theory, and Bruce, through example, inspired me to be more insightful and imaginative as a teacher. Cristy kindly came aboard late in the process, and somehow made time to provide prolific, engaged feedback.

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ABSTRACT

ARRESTING BEAUTY, FRAMING EVIDENCE:
AN INQUIRY INTO PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE TEACHING OF WRITING

by

Kuhio Walters

University of New Hampshire, May, 2009

This dissertation examines the uses and conceptualizations of photography in college Composition. Composition has long been conflicted over the relation between form and content—and since the 1970s, between aesthetics and politics. Today, this disciplinary tension manifests in how the visual is brought into pedagogy: either it is approached aesthetically, as something to beautify a text, or politically, as a source of cultural critique. The field’s uses of photography have been positioned within this aesthetics/politics binary, but to understand the medium as only one or the other is to miss its full practical and theoretical potential.

Theoretically, photography is powerful and poignant because it is both a product of society and a work of art; both ideological artifact and piece of the natural world; both beautiful and deceptive. As an utterly ambiguous object of questionable knowledge, the photograph is an ideal tool for introducing students to the genuine challenges of interpretation. Practically, photographs are easily examined by groups of students, are convenient points of reflection for class discussion, and are pleasing to work into one’s
written text. This pleasure is key: it makes the act of composing an affective, critical, artistic, and thoroughly rhetorical process.

Each chapter ties these practical and theoretical qualities of the photograph into different areas of concern to writing teachers. Chapter I looks at the ways photography is usually situated by social pedagogies, arguing that personal and aesthetic uses of photography also help students develop critical thinking skills. Chapter II considers the poststructural critique of a “stable self” in autobiography, arguing the photo-essay can help students maintain a strong narrative voice in spite of this de-stabilizing of self. Chapter III considers how photography helps students meld affective and intellectual aspects of subjective experience into research writing. Chapter IV considers the moral challenges posed by looking at disturbing photographs, arguing that asking students to work on such images aesthetically helps them confront the horrific events depicted, but in a way that is survivable. The chapters build in ethical complexity, but aesthetics and ethics are balanced throughout—which, this dissertation argues, is the essential power of photography.
INTRODUCTION

Though this dissertation focuses on photography and its unsettled relation to composition, my thinking throughout is firmly rooted in arguments that are familiar to the teaching of writing. Photography is the main theoretical vehicle in each chapter, in other words, but the larger argument is this: when it comes to educating First Year college writers, personal pleasure is fundamental to the development of critical thinking. I extend this by claiming, further, that even political thinking demands a kind of aesthetic engagement. Another way to say this is that one’s attention to form and style cannot be fully sifted out of one’s views on a political problem, even if that problem demands immediate ethical action. This isn’t to disregard the need for ethical action in society, but only to point out that political thought is never free of aesthetic considerations (especially visual pleasure). Each chapter extends this claim into various areas of concern for compositionists. In this sense, photography serves as a theoretical metaphor, allowing me to take a new look at old topics.

Indeed, photography can powerfully demonstrate the relation between aesthetics and politics, for reasons this dissertation will explore at length. But it must be emphasized again that the aesthetics/politics relationship has always concerned teachers of college writing, with or without photography. Even if they do not bring visual materials into their classrooms, writing teachers have long confronted the slippery relation between form and content—or, since the 1970s, between a writer’s personal style, and her consciousness of social history and politics. For this reason, I begin this dissertation by situating
photography squarely within the history of American writing instruction, briefly sketching how it relates to the three most commonly acknowledged writing pedagogies: current-traditional or positivist, process-oriented or expressive, and the social or social constructivist approach. I do not have the space here to provide a nuanced description of composition's rich history. I am silent on the cognitive approach, for example, as well as various versions of social pedagogy that Lester Faigley discusses in his historical essay, “Competing Theories of Process: A Critique and a Proposal” (1986). At the very least, however, we will get a sense of how style and political awareness have been held in tension in writing pedagogy, especially over the last few decades. Photography needs to be situated in relation to and within this tense dynamic, if we are to understand the medium's full potential as a feature of composition.

Positivist rhetoric, the original model for mass writing instruction in the U.S. (against which expressivism and social constructivism took shape as forms of political and pedagogical protest), dominated the field through the nineteenth-century and well into the twentieth, and can probably still be found in many composition programs. It emphasizes mechanical correctness and relies on stylistic abstractions to explain good writing—such as the famous triad of style, “Unity, Coherence, Emphasis.” (Bob Connors in Composition-Rhetoric called these “the master static abstractions,” “the doughty trinity” that were used to generally define good writing for over a century (294).) The positivist classroom is also product-centered. In Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness, Patricia Bizzell calls it the “black box” approach, in which a writing assignment is inserted at one end, the finished product comes out the other, and the teacher has no sense of the process that occurs in between (176).
Process was Born—and Other Conversion Narratives,” Lad Tobin sums up the approach as “traditional, product-driven, rules-based, correctness-obsessed,” with the only “process” being when the student must “write, proofread, hand in, and then move on to next week’s assignment” (5).

In this model, good writing cannot be taught, but students can be drilled in the rules that seem to empirically govern great literature. Therefore, its main theoretical object is “style,” by which it tends to mean, as Bob Connors writes, “grammatical purity and propriety” (Composition-Rhetoric 126). This reductive sense of style is traceable to the 19th-century originators of composition curricula, such as A.S. Hill, John Genung, and Barrett Wendell, and even further back to Hugh Blair, George Campbell, and Richard Whately, philosophical proponents of Scottish Common Sense Realism. By the time classical rhetoric had sifted through the medieval epoch and been processed by Blair, it had become little more than an emphasis on grammar-as-style, stripped of any connection to invention—never mind ethos, pathos, or logos. In addition, Blair believed the most admirable goal for young writers was to aspire toward the style of canonical literature. (Albert Kitzhaber notes, in his Rhetoric in American Colleges, that Blair’s Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres were extremely influential: it was published in 1783 and was by far the most widely circulated rhetoric text in Britain and the U.S. for over sixty years, influencing rhetoric texts long after it had been taken out of print (50).)

Combine this tendency toward belletrism, the emphasis on style as adherence to the “rules,” and the 19th-century American university’s growing fascination with rigorous German empiricism (essentially scientific positivism applied to the natural and human sciences), and you have a new, uniquely American kind of pedagogy. On the one hand it
is a dream of pure rationality, "concerned solely with the communication of truth that is
certain and empirically verifiable," James Berlin wrote ("Contemporary Composition:
The Major Pedagogical Theories" 770). On the other, it is the pedagogical equivalent of
the New Criticism, using close reading to empirically valorize canonical texts. A student
with an unconventional composing process doesn’t stand a chance in such an approach;
he is subjected to grammar drills, sentence-combining, and abstract notions of good
writing, all intended to help him approach the vaulted style of great works of literature.
This was the stark pedagogical scene that gave rise to and stoked the political fires of
expressivism.

The first, revolutionary act of process rhetoric was, simply enough, to conduct
research into the writing process. James Marshall sees 1963’s Research in Written
Composition by Dick Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer’s as “one of
the anchoring documents of our professional interest” in process pedagogy (“Of What
Does Skill in Writing Consist?” 45). Lester Faigley also sees it as a “convenient
landmark” for marking our disciplinary origins, because of its focus on process
(“Competing Theories of Process: A Critique and Proposal” 527). In “Pre-Writing: the
Stage of Discovery in the Writing Process,” D. Gordon Rohman claimed, as his title
suggests, that writing consists of distinct stages, one of which was thinking before
writing. “Good thinking can produce good writing; and, conversely, without good
thinking, good writing is impossible” (106). In The Composing Processes of Twelfth
Graders, Janet Emig supported this idea of an internal process that precedes the
production of a finished text: writing "does not occur as a left-to-right, solid,
uninterrupted activity with an even pace" (84). The processes were variously explained—
e.g., Rohman saw it as linear and progressive; Emig, as overlapping and recursive—but for the first time, teachers were behaving as if, in James Britton's words, "knowledge is a process of knowing rather than a storehouse of the known" ("Language and Learning Across the Curriculum" 221). (Expressivism, for example, shifted grading practice "from summative to formative evaluation," Lester Faigley writes ("Judging Writing, Judging Selves" 395).)

Here, the concept of style is again a central aspect of pedagogy, but it varies greatly from the positivist model. Whereas a positivist pedagogy hollows rhetoric out to be little more than style as rule-following, in the service of the Great Books, the rhetoric of expressivism packs into style a whole network of aesthetic, political, and rhetorical meanings and purposes. To take a prime example, in Writing Without Teachers (his first book on composition and a clarion call for process pedagogy), Peter Elbow shows us that writing pedagogy must now search for style in a much wider range of spaces, notably, "inside the author's head or...inside the heads of readers" (158), as well as within "maverick readings and naïve readings of strong simple feelings" (159). Style no longer resides solely outside the student writer, in culturally sanctioned literary texts, but can also be found within the creative imaginations of each literate person.

For the first time, the subjective experiences of students were seen as both pedagogically and politically useful. Typically student-centered, the expressivistic classroom militates against the positivistic view of students as empty vessels, teachers as fountains with true knowledge, and the act of writing as a mechanistic way to test the successful transfer of this knowledge. Student knowledge, in fact, dialogically shapes the classroom experience, and the expressivistic teacher is more a facilitator of conversations
than a rule-enforcer (of grammar, spelling, syntax rules, etc).

However, the most politically charged claim of expressivism, it seems, is that a strong sense of style in writing can reveal the unique identity, persona, or voice of the writer. About a process-oriented course they designed at the University of New Hampshire, Don Murray and Les Fisher write, “our students began to discover they had something to say, [and] they began to hear a distinctive voice, their own, saying it” (“Perhaps the Professor Should Cut Class” 170). Here, a writer’s style can communicate a strong, identifiable subjectivity, or unique voice. In the positivist classroom, this voice is marginalized, penalized, disciplined, silenced for the sake of the Ideal Voice of culture—that is, the voice of a stable, unchanging cultural style that supposedly transcends history and individual differences. In the expressivist classroom, the student’s authentic voice—commonly found in the personal essay, for which the student has chosen the topic—is both a structuring principle and a form of resistance to the alienating environment of the corporatized university system.

The social approach to pedagogy also attacks positivist rhetoric at its roots, but from a different angle: there is no “stable, unchanging cultural style” because all style is constructed discursively, historically, socially. However, this critique of style as a social construction also becomes a critique of expressivism, since, as Lester Faigley writes in “Judging Writing, Judging Selves,” the “unified, individual consciousness coterminous with the physical body turns out not to be the ‘natural’ self but a Western version with specific historical and economic origins” (396). That is, if style derives from the writer’s unique identity, as expressive scholars suggest, than “unique identity” also becomes a problematic concept. Furthermore, since expressivism tends to value personal (especially
autobiographical and narrative) over academic (especially expository and critical) kinds of writing, the social approach generally sees expressivism as being too self-absorbed, even solipsistic, and naïve about the role of history in shaping the writing act. Alan France goes so far as to argue that personal writing "reinforces students' social alienation and insularity by encouraging them to identify good writing with the ideal of the autonomous self, the 'authentic voice,' ignoring the cultural and historical determinants of individual identity" ("Assigning Places" 600).

So, while the expressive and social approaches agree that positivism is bad, they agree on little else. They especially disagree on whether or not style is a relevant matter of concern in a First Year writing course. The answer to this question has consequences for classroom practice: if the goal of First Year writing is to help students take some pleasure in the writing act so that they are more likely to enjoy composing, and therefore more likely to use writing as a way to learn later in their lives, then expressivism's fondness for personal writing and its emphasis on a strong prose style is preferable; however, if the goal is to produce ethical thinkers who can use writing to engage the important political issues in society, then social constructivism's fondness for expository analysis and ideological critique is preferable.

Of course, we are doing a disservice to our students and ourselves if we allow the line between the personal and the political, and the aesthetical and ethical, to be so absolute. My own bias is toward personal narratives and a close attention to (verbal and visual) aesthetics—a personal preference this dissertation doesn't hide—but for me, this doesn't mean politics and aesthetics are mutually exclusive. In fact, I follow many compositionists in searching for a middle path between these categories. For example, in
Romancing Rhetorics, Sherry Gradin, an expressivist with clear attachments to personal narrative writing, writes that “we must examine the cultural ‘I’ we privilege . . . rigorously” (106). And in “Competing Theories of Process,” Lester Faigley, clearly a social constructivist with attachments to poststructural theory, writes that the process movement has “given student writing a value and authority absent in current-traditional approaches,” no small thing in an educational system that so often devalues the subjective experiences of students (537). Attempts at hybridity between expressive and social concerns, of which this dissertation is one, are more the norm than the exception in Composition scholarship today.

I take this to be a good thing, and further that any absolute distinction between aesthetics and politics is unrealistic, a belief that is obviously not restricted to Composition. In the introduction to Between Ethics and Aesthetics, an interdisciplinary essay collection that deals with this same issue, Dorota Glowacka and Stephen Boos observe that at many points during the history of philosophy, the aesthetical and the ethical have been viewed as intimately connected. The authors observe that Kant powerfully articulated the “problematic nature of the relationship between beauty and . . . moral goodness” (1); Friedrich Schiller contended “that aesthetic education alone enables humanity to make the transition from nature to moral and political freedom” (2); Nietzsche posited “that the existence of the world can be legitimated only on aesthetic grounds” (2); and numerous poststructural thinkers, following Emmanuel Levinas’ theories of alterity, “have searched for [ethical] ways to [aesthetically] articulate the exteriority that transcends thought itself and therefore remains nonrepresentable” (3). In the same book, artist and critic Alex Colville makes the historical observation that the
highest visual arts of any age have always revealed that age's "political aspirations" ("Beauty and the Beast" 253), and Elizabeth Edwards suggests that the most important function of art is to resist and subvert "the malevolent gaze of a totalizing ethics" ("The Banal Profound and the Profoundly Banal" 271).

The essays in *Between Ethics and Aesthetics* show us that a theory of Composition based either totally on a desire for ethics, or totally on a search for the beautiful, fails to account for the historical and philosophical intersections between the two categories. The photographic pedagogy described in this dissertation suggests a way to combine them without privileging one over the other. Hybrid expressive/social pedagogies are becoming more common, as I noted above, but when it comes to photography, the social view seems to have dominated the field. The social approach tends to ignore the photograph's epistemological idiosyncrasies (i.e., the photograph is a representation that is also a slice of the real—more on this in Chapter I). The traditional concerns of an expressive pedagogy—writing is a pleasurable act; students' personal experiences are valuable sources of academic meaning; an attention to style and aesthetics is an important part of developing critical thinking skills—help us balance out this lopsided discourse on the photographic image.

To restate the core argument of this dissertation, an attention to aesthetics strengthens, rather than weakens, political thinking. Social constructivism has tended to argue the opposite position, that aesthetic concerns are superfluous to thinking about political issues. I don't think such an argument is necessary. In fact, perhaps we can ask whether young writers should be required to be ethical in the classroom—we can doubt that the teacher's political sensibilities can (or should) be imposed onto the student. There
is no reason to expect a student (or teacher) to authentically engage an ethical dilemma if this dilemma is disconnected from his notion of what is beautiful, disgusting, tragic, melancholy, etc. A teacher can ask a student to think critically about a topic, but if we expect anything more than lip service paid to a shallow political correctness, we will also have to engage him emotionally, affectively. Affect is difficult to weave into pedagogy, since it is comprised of subtle, fleeting qualities of experience that are difficult to analyze and evaluate. But by bringing enjoyable aesthetic practices into the classroom, we can bring affect and critical analysis together to form an authentic response to real world problems. Working on photographs—taking pictures, cropping and framing them, pasting them into an essay, describing them with the right words—helps writers think closely about the aesthetic conditions that accompany political thought.

I believe, in other words, that students can be helped toward the pleasures of scholarly critique and, perhaps, political agency, but first they need an opportunity to take pleasure in the art of composing. (I suspect there is a pleasure in even the most disturbing scholarly work, but its serious nature generally keeps us from acknowledging the ways that it satisfies aesthetic, as well as ethical, sensibilities—a claim I develop further in Chapter IV). Each chapter of this dissertation offers photographic practices that connect this kind of pleasure with particular writing assignments. Moreover, the assignments in each chapter build toward increasingly complex ethical and aesthetic issues, requiring writers to gradually become more nuanced in their creative and rhetorical practices.

Chapter I, "Composed and Framed: Photography within and Beyond Visual Studies," makes two key points. First, it aims to demonstrate that the unique properties of the photograph have been obscured by "social semiotics," a method of visual analysis
that tends to diminish the role of emotion in the creation of cultural meaning. The critical social bias of social semiotics reflects a broader anxiety in our field concerning the role of affect, aesthetics, and subjective experience in photography. It seems as if the camera (so closely linked to popular aesthetics and personal experience) can only support a socially progressive pedagogy if we restrain its capacity for visual pleasure. However, this chapter argues that Roland Barthes’ conception of photography—which sees affect and aesthetics as central to the political life of the medium—can actually sensitize us to history and urgent social issues, because it calls viewers and writers into an uncommon space of reflection, where the private and the public intersect. Second, this chapter offers activities with photography that allow students to link their writing act with the aesthetic pleasures of visual design.

Chapter II, “Visible Things’ and Beyond: Photography, Voice, and the Personal Narrative,” argues that photography can help the personal essay account for the poststructural critique of voice, while also giving students multiple ways to perform some of the complex subject positions valued by poststructuralism. The debate over what defines good writing has a long history, one whose axis has often been the conflict between the “personal” and the “academic.” This chapter challenges this distinction, looking at the idea of a writer’s personal “voice” and style as a complex performance of subjectivity that meshes well with photography. In this sense, Chapter II endorses the poststructural concept of the de-centered, unsettled Subject. Along with personal writing, photography reveals the troubled nature of representation and subjectivity. However, the assignments I describe at the end of this chapter also allow for a range of performances of
subjectivity that make the combination of "life writing" and "light writing" a potent form of cultural engagement.

Chapter III, "The Art of Seeking: Photography and the Research Essay," contends that research writing benefits from the use of photographs, but not only as a source of completely objective data; photography can also reveal the ambiguity that is inherent to any fact-based inquiry into human culture. Photography, with its natural affinity to Surrealism, reveals the research process as an art that composes and frames, but never completely erases, the mysteries of everyday life. This may seem an odd claim, since research assignments have traditionally been geared toward logic, linearity, and coherence, and surrealism seems to contradict these terms. However, I follow Rosalind Krauss in positioning photography as one of the building blocks of the surrealist aesthetic, agreeing with her that "in cutting into the body of the world, stopping it, framing it, spacing it, photography reveals that world as written" (40). Photography cracks open the visual world to reveal patterns of meaning that are otherwise invisible. Seeking, in this context, is a matter of learning more about the world, but also a process of "unlearning," as Bruce Ballenger calls it (The Curious Researcher 4). That is, skillful research includes re-envisioning experience—looking around with "a wild eye," as the surrealists used to say. Research writing may not have a reputation for this kind of charisma, but the camera contributes to its creative possibilities, helping students gather visual data that can launch inquiry and thicken written narrative.

The fourth and final chapter, "Disturbing Pleasure: Photography and the Im/possible Ethics of Catastrophe," considers the role of photography in commemorating catastrophic events and atrocities. Disturbing photographs, monuments to the worst
moments in human history, seem ever capable of turning viewers into voyeurs. Viewers of such images need to be ethical witnesses to the horrific events, critics of the photograph say, not pleasure seekers. However, rather than simply not looking at such images, or looking at them only with pious moral regard, this chapter contends that voyeurism precedes every act of witnessing. That is, an inexplicable visual pleasure, perhaps registered as a piquant curiosity or an inability to look away, is the root of critical, ethical vision. This chapter looks for the genius of photography in the governmental and journalistic uses of catastrophe images, and will generate such questions as: Do disturbing images impact the everyday goals of teaching, reading, and writing? How might our society be damaged not only by war but also by photographs of war, long after the physical conflict has ended? Given the technological and aesthetic affordances and restrictions of camera technology, is it possible to develop a set of photo practices that acknowledges and respects the suffering of others? How can photography or writing engage history ethically, when history is so painful and photography so saturated with pleasure? This chapter concludes, also, by offering photographic practices I have used successfully in my own teaching.

Overall, this dissertation proposes a First Year writing curriculum that uses photography and writing to lead students into increasingly more complex considerations of the relation between aesthetics and ethics. This folds neatly into the history of composition, which has long wrestled with form versus content, personal versus political, artful versus ethical. The goal, ultimately, is twofold: to create a teaching practice that will allow students to make more sense of the visual and verbal worlds they inhabit, and
to help them find pleasure—aesthetic, ethical, personal, communal—that will lead them back to the acts of writing, looking closely, and thinking critically and creatively.
CHAPTER I

COMPOSED AND FRAMED: PHOTOGRAPHY WITHIN AND BEYOND VISUAL STUDIES

I wanted to learn at all costs what Photography was "in itself," by what essential feature it was to be distinguished from the community of images. Such a desire really meant that beyond the evidence provided by technology and usage, and despite its tremendous contemporary expansion, I wasn't sure that Photography existed, that it had a "genius" of its own.

—Barthes, Camera Lucida (3)

What is the "genius" of photography, to borrow Barthes' term? How can it be distinguished from the other visual media—cinema, painting, sculpture, and theater, for example—that saturate and give shape to the visible world? This question defies its commonsense answer. The medium is generically defined by its specific technology, the camera, and by its product, the still image. But such a definition offers very little, if the goal is to understand photography culturally and semiotically. It leaves unexamined the immense role photography plays in global culture, for example, or how deeply the photograph has become enmeshed with the act of remembering, on both public and personal levels. Such a definition fails come to grips with the complex role of photography in shaping either culture or individual subjects. How, then, to draw out photography from the community of images, and how to find the significance of its genius for the teaching of writing?

This chapter attempts to answer these questions from two directions. First, it confirms a primary claim of much contemporary Visual Studies, namely, that the visual
needs to be a more prominent and integral aspect of Composition. Second, it distinguishes the photograph from the broader realm of "the Visual," as "Visual Studies" usually constructs this concept.

This argument is difficult to make because it relies on the rhetorical work Visual Studies has accomplished, such as analyzing the relation of the visual to literacy and clearing a space for visual work in the writing classroom, but at the same time maintains that Visual Studies has not gone far enough in thinking about photography. I use Roland Barthes’ notion of the "punctum" to problematize the common practice of lumping photography into the same category as all other visual modes of representation. In summary, this chapter, by calling attention to the photograph as a unique visual object, also points out the following irony: the currently dominant means of talking about visuality in Composition reduces the ways we can theorize the photograph.

An understanding of Barthes’ work is central to this chapter, but before looking closely at his conception of the photograph, I will review a few key texts in Composition that deal with photography. Though I look at various approaches to visual culture, the work of the New London Group is prominent here. This group of scholars has done much to theorize the relation of the visual to literacy, but I will focus on the scholarship of two of its more prominent members—Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen—to consider the limitations of Visual Studies as it is usually practiced. When Barthes’ work is finally addressed directly—in the subsection below titled The Photograph Returns—it should be clear that the systematic rigor of contemporary Visual Studies, especially in the form known as "social semiotics," while pioneering a new vision of writing instruction, has not sufficiently explained the significance of photography’s relation to affect.
The First Revolution: Pleasure and the Photographic Image

Though book-length inquiries that merged photographic images and primary education existed as early as the 1940s (see Williams' *Learning with Pictures*), Hart Day Leavitt and David Sohn's *Stop, Look, and Write!* was, as far as I know, the first entirely photograph-based Composition textbook aimed at secondary- and college-level writing classes. The book's format consists of thematic chapters with thematically related photographs—for example, shots of people in deep concentration, humorous photos, abstract shapes, images of animals—followed by brief writing prompts that ask students to reflect on the images (for instance, "For each picture, list three details that show the [subject's] concentration," 1). Their goal is to offer "a way of seeing which will spread through an individual's entire life, from thinking to writing, to personal relationships, to studying, to emotional reactions, and to inspiration" (*Stop, Look, and Write!* 222).

Three principles underscore Leavitt and Sohn's pedagogy. First, they are explicitly reverential toward the "the great photographer," as evidenced in their prefatory remarks:

Here is a unique new method of learning to write that is as revolutionary as it is simple. Based on the principle that all effective writing depends primarily on accurate, insightful observation, it teaches the student how to see life with the perceptive eye of the great photographer. Then, the student learns how to express himself and what he has observed in an entirely fresh and original way. (*Stop, Look, and Write!* inside back cover)

With a stock of expressly artistic images from the likes of Robert Capa, Edward Steichen, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and other "prizewinners," the text asserts that the vision represented by these structurally beautiful photographs is vision at its best. There is pleasure to be derived from this kind of looking, and if students learn to see their
experience as it is portrayed in such photos, they will have a heightened grasp of reality that will be conveyed through their writing.

Second, the formal feature that unites the activities of this textbook is the basic observation that photographic images allow us to contemplate the world’s materiality: “The writing exercises and opportunities in this book will help you find ways to express meaning in the most effective possible ways. The ‘meaning’ is the result of observation, and must include the particular, the specific, the detail” (Look, Think, and Write i; boldface in original). The photographs chosen not only provide vision “at its best,” but also, like all photographs, offer the empirical fullness of a visual scene, and thus an opportunity for students to hone their skills of close observation, discrimination, and description. Here, we may recall E. B. White’s advice that beginning essayists use “Definite, Concrete, Specific” language in order to move and persuade the reader. By focusing intently on the physical details of a photographic subject, the authors argue, students can achieve “clarity, completeness, and accuracy” in their writing (Look, Think, and Write 210). According to Leavitt and Sohn, photography provides a nearly noise-free channel through which writers can access the physical, sensual world.

Third, related to the above notion that photography can link visual pleasure to literacy, is the belief in photographic literacy as a progressive political act. All photographs present “the particular, the specific, the detail,” that is, material, physically sensible bodies with which the viewer interacts. Even an Ansel Adams landscape presents a physical mass, a body of land that produces pleasure. Leavitt and Sohn use this sense of visual pleasure to position themselves politically. If students learn to pay close
attention to the aesthetic and physical “genius” of these perfect photographs, the authors write,

No academician or pedagogue will be able to argue, as they so often do, that “pictures” have destroyed the art of thought, and have corrupted language; for nobody who has learned to translate accurate, imaginative visual images into precise, suggestive language can ever be charged as an enemy of verbal expressiveness. (*Stop, Look, and Write!* 222)

As others have pointed out (Cope and Kalantzis; George; Kress; Williams, *Tuned In*), resistance to popular culture in the academy was in full bloom by the 1960s, so we see here that the authors are defending their project, engaging in their era’s quarrel with institutional conservatism. The “academician and pedagogue” referred to are probably those administrators who do not see the value of photographic literacy learning (though it’s odd that the writers do not think of themselves as pedagogues). According to this argument, photographs are a radical means of achieving certain traditional goals of the academy.

Note the links Leavitt and Sohn find between politics, pleasure, and photography. In the passage above, they imply that the translation of images into words provides for a sensual interaction with the material world, a kind of bodily pleasure. In their view, a photographic pedagogy of literacy provides “a way of seeing which will spread through an individual’s entire life, from thinking... to emotional reactions,” which links language and affect with the body, with the sensual facticity of the world. The authors imply, in other words, that translating images into words provides a sensual, pleasurable encounter with language and that such pleasure is fundamental to literacy learning. (If we are playful, “suggestive language” refers to an evocative description but also a risqué remark, a hint that leads to the body.) So rather than corrupting language (Leavitt and Sohn’s
"corrupt" can mean either a process of decay, of decomposing, or of moral perversion), photographs bring life to words. The terms in this passage on pedagogy—“destroyed,” “corrupted,” “charged,” “enemy”—reveal a double attack on socially conservative notions of education: structurally, in terms of what can be experienced as an object of learning (photography animates, does not decompose, language), and politically, in terms of the kind of aesthetic restrictions placed on Freshman writing. This use of photography makes sensuality and affect an everyday part of Composition pedagogy. Photography itself, not simply “the visual” or “expressiveness,” surfaces here as a focus of and motivation for disciplinary debate.

This suggests at the very least that photographic pedagogy was from the outset positioned against “academics,” that is, those who believed the function of writing instruction was to cordon off and teach a well-defined category of language—against practitioners of “current-traditional rhetoric,” for example. For Leavitt and Sohn, the three underlying principles in Stop, Look, and Write! reflected the strength and promise of contemporary Composition, and the purchase more liberal curricula had achieved in institutions traditionally dominated by conservative, print-based notions of literacy.

Inversely, these three points would come to epitomize for social theorists in the 1980s and 90s a weakness in expressivist pedagogy, namely, that it was too concerned with the writer’s sensual, individual experience, and as a result did not attend to the socio-historical problems that had been so forcefully raised throughout the 60s and 70s. Social perspectives in Composition, especially cultural criticism, would eventually dominate in the field’s discussions of the photograph, and the photograph as an affective object would seemingly disappear as a relevant theoretical concern.
The Visual Revolution in Literacy Studies

In “From Analysis to Design: Visual Communication in the Teaching of Writing,” Diana George observes that, while there has been a long-standing interest in making “the visual” important to writing instruction, there hasn’t been a consistent sense of how to do so. This pronouncement will probably ring true for any teacher of writing who has seriously pursued an interest in photography. It is now common to talk of the importance of the visual and to call for a pedagogy of “multiliteracies” in our textbooks and journals, but there is still confusion over the definition of these terms, let alone the role of the visual in the classroom. And, George notes, not only is research concerning the importance of “visual literacy” in the lives of college students fairly new, but “rarely does that call [for a pedagogy of the visual] address students as producers as well as consumers or critics of the visual” (14). She argues that what has been missing from visual pedagogies is an attention to design, an idea popularized by the New London Group.1 This notion of design—the ability to textually and visually interact with, modify, and build on the web of meaning that comprises social discourse—reduces the rhetorical distance between word and image. In this respect, George’s essay is a significant moment in the history of Composition, as it challenges us to read the visual as a problem integral to contemporary writing instruction.

Gunther Kress, a member of the New London Group who has been particularly interested in the artifacts and contexts of visual communication, offers a more elaborate articulation of George’s problem: there has been, Kress observes, a “revolution … in the area of communication,” which has [dislodged] written language from the centrality which it has held, or which has been ascribed to it, in public communication. Perhaps the most obvious
example is the increasing prominence—dominance even—of the visual in many areas of public communication as well. While this is obvious, the implications of that shift have not in any sense begun to be drawn out or assessed in any coherent, overt, fully conscious, and consistent fashion. (Kress 182)

The Visual Studies texts I have encountered commonly make use of this foundational claim—of a revolution whose ramifications are difficult to identify, assess, and apply in teaching. It is often the structuring principle in the rhetoric of vision-centric arguments (e.g., Hocks; Kligerman; McLuhan; Miholic; Williams, Tuned In), and has been prominent in popular philosophical treatments of photography (e.g., Barthes, "The Photographic Message" and Camera Lucida; Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"; Berger, "Another Way of Telling"; Sontag, On Photography and Regarding the Pain of Others). Regardless of this supposed revolution and the rise of Visual Studies, however, and for a variety of disciplinary, ideological, and practical reasons, photography itself has only rarely been the object of pedagogical or literacy-based research.

There is no question that the New London Group (hereafter, the NLG) holds an important place in the scholarship of contemporary Composition. Diana George’s essay marks a strong attachment to the work of the NLG, most of whom have taken the word/image relation as their theoretical focus. Especially relevant to my thinking is the work of Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, who provide a rigorous hermeneutics and theory of the way many forms of verbal and visual media intersect to make meaning. In brief, the two primary goals of "social semiotics," as Kress and van Leeuwen call their work (5), are to expand the definition of literacy to "account for the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies," and to foster
“understanding and competent control of representational forms that are becoming increasingly significant in the overall communications environment, such as visual images and their relationship to the written word” (9). With scrupulous attention to the subtle but vast range of the semiotic landscape (for example, the color, size and placement of font in the image; contrast between its background/foreground; perspective; framing; line of sight among characters in the image; and the social context in which the image is deployed), social semiotics parses the visual scene, whether photographic advertisement, movie still, or sculpture, into readable objects which are shown to serve ideological functions. They have compiled a library of strategies and conventions to codify and interpret all visual scenes and demonstrate how, in a variety of social spaces, public communication is designed to reify or manipulate the structures of power in a given social context.

Diana George draws wholeheartedly from social semiotics. Her historical sketch of visual literacy in English and writing classrooms identifies three primary uses of the image. First, popular images in the classroom have historically been an implicit threat to “high” culture, so they have either been included as a way to introduce belles-lettres—a baby-step toward Great Literature—or in a spirit of resignation, as if they were an unavoidable blight to high culture. Images used in such a model were usually “not mere popular culture but popular culture in the literary tradition,” such as the use of artistic prints in James McCrimmon’s Writing with a Purpose, as George shows (20). Second, after World War II, the communications movement popularized the analysis of ad images as an “immunization” against propaganda. In this case, analysis was more concerned with identifying the “central argument” of the ad image, and “did not always or consistently
include careful consideration of how images, layout, or graphics actually communicated meaning” (21). Third, in the 1970s, “expressivist pedagogies,” like Leavitt and Sohn’s, asked students “how a particular image made them feel or of what an image reminded them” (22). In all three of these models, George argues, the image is subordinated to verbal forms of communication.

We do not have a coherent theory of the visual, George maintains, because none of these models presents the visual as something valuable in and of itself, as an object of knowledge that can be a locus of discursive, rhetorical, cultural design—something semantically distinct from, but equal in meaning to, written language. By emphasizing the concept of design, George provides teachers with a coherent principle of use, “a new configuration of verbal/visual relationships ... [that allows] for more than image analysis, image-as-prompt, or image-as-dumbed-down language” (32). By asking her students to produce “visual arguments” using multiple visual modes, she requires them to make use of the complicated systems of signification present in our “aggressively visual culture” (15), and to become “producers as well as receivers” of visual media (18). Only the notion of design, George implies, can effectively distinguish between and provide coherence to the sundry views on visual literacy.

The social concept of design—essentially a bridge between visual-textual analysis and the production of cultural meaning—is a powerful response to critics such as Maxine Hairston, who see in cultural studies the trumpeting of an elitist politics. On the contrary, we can see that a pedagogy of design actually promotes rather than ignores the connection between theory and classroom practice. But there is still a limitation: in its longing to free the image from its subservience to the word, social semiotics has
advanced a theoretical model that puts constraints on how we understand and deploy the photograph. Note in particular George’s critique of “expressivistic pedagogies” (22), which she casts aside with little effort. She marks as turning points in our understanding of the image with two texts, John Berger’s 1972 *Ways of Seeing* and Bartholomae and Petrosky’s *Ways of Reading Words and Images* (2003), which epitomize for her the serious beginning of visual literacy in Composition. It is after the publication of this latter book, George maintains, that we begin to see the image-text as worthy of specialized scholarly attention, an assertion based on faith in the materialistic and semiotic methods common to cultural criticism. The methodology practiced by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*, in which public images are dissected and made to expose and critique bourgeois ideology, is the primary, early example of this method.

So it isn’t surprising that, in George’s history, the first Composition textbooks to treat the visual—such as McCrimmon’s *Writing with a Purpose* and Walker Gibson’s *Seeing and Writing*—are termed “expressivistic,” a label with which she connotes political naïveté and self-indulgence, at best (22). This is clearly a misreading of Gibson’s text, but what is more important to note is George’s reason for this designation: such textbooks ask students to respond to images affectively.iii She argues that they assume “each student [is] an individual who [has] something to say and could find a voice with which say it,” and that in these books the “focus is clearly on the self” (22). The implication is that encouraging affective responses to an image does not help students see the image “as complex communication intricately related to the world,” and in fact turns the student away from the historical and ethical dilemmas of our culture (32).
This suppression of affect as a pedagogical concern has produced a Visual Studies that leans heavily on an impoverished historical materialism for its way of seeing.

By entering the discussion of the visual from this perspective, George has pushed aside alternative means of understanding the photograph. All visual objects are considered alike in their ability to be turned toward cultural critique. "Visual Studies," which concerns itself with understanding and manipulating all things visual, holds a tyrannical sway over otherwise distinct modes of visual representation, and tends to elide the unique qualities of the medium that theorists and practitioners of photography have been grappling with for over a century. This is not unique to George's proposal but is built into the social pedagogies that ground her argument. Ironically, David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky's Ways of Reading Words and Images, which deals exclusively with essays on photography, is an exception among more socially-oriented approaches. The assignments that ask students to critically read photographs are evocative, promising a deep engagement with both the production and analysis of photography. However, their assignments that ask students to use actual photographs sometimes seem like afterthoughts, rather than vigorous engagements with the medium. Other textbooks, such as Anne Wysocki and Dennis Lynch's Compose, Design, Advocate, offer wonderful activities with actual photographs (see their chapter entitled "Analyzing Documentary Photography"); but again, such textbooks tend to downplay photography's epistemological quirks and idiosyncrasies, in order to address a wider range of visual and verbal media. More often than not, references to photographic analysis have followed the model outlined by social semiotics.
George implies that the concept of design separates her pedagogy from earlier models of cultural criticism, but a glance at these models reveals her affinity with them. To cite one important example, Joel Foreman and David Shumway, in “Cultural Studies: Reading Visual Texts,” define a visual text as any image, photographic or not, which must be decoded “in much the same way that the letters or words on the page of a document are decoded” (245). For Foreman and Shumway, the fact that we can scan and understand immediately the import of a magazine advertisement demonstrates how deeply and intricately involved these pictures are with culture. In order for students to analyze such images, they need “to be informed about the process and relations of production that resulted” in this particular combination of signs (246), and must possess a “particular interpretive perspective,” which for these authors is Althusserian (247).

For Foreman and Shumway, in other words, ideology is profoundly unconscious, and so the everyday act of looking (at advertisements, especially) is actually a process of being blinded by and to ideology. They observe, with Althusser, that even the conflicts that naturally exist within ideology are hidden. They assert that their theoretical framework provides a way to break through ideology, a way in—which is to say, a way to keep ideology out, or in Charles Paine’s words, a means of “inoculating” (The Resistant Writer: Rhetoric as Immunity 12) vi students against its infectious powers to blind, and thus allowing for progressive civic action:

Because the media are not absolutely controlled, and more importantly, representations themselves are too polymorphous to be rigorously limited, contradictions to the dominant interests are a part of culture: [quoting Catherine Belsey] “The role of ideology is to suppress these contradictions in the interests of the preservation of the existing social formation, but their presence ensures that it is always possible, with whatever difficulty, to identify them, to recognize ideology for what it is, and to take an active part in transforming it by producing new meanings.” (248, second emphasis mine)
The authors essentially ask students to approach textual criticism as an act of social design, as George does, though they rely more on a word-based disassembling and reassembling of cultural images, a contextualizing of images. Overall, they want to “help students read their culture critically and thus to produce new meanings that resist ideology” (261). For Foreman and Shumway, and for the NLG, all image-texts that come before the analyst—including those registered not only by language and consciousness, but also by the body (see endnote ii)—ultimately expose themselves to being read, used, and redesigned along the lines of a materialist critique.

If the so-called expressivists lost sight of the photograph’s potential for political engagement, those in cultural studies lost sight of the photograph as an affective object. Using rather broad strokes, we can sketch two fundamental assumptions about Cultural Studies in Composition: (1) language is always a social phenomenon, and (2) visual units of meaning are readily put to the same ideological use as linguistic units. As classroom practice has revealed to many of us, this understanding works particularly well when analyzing public photographs, especially advertising images. But there is a pronounced absence in most cultural studies pedagogies of interest in the photograph as an entity with intimate connections to the affective lives of individuals. With few exceptions, the social view has treated all images as readable texts (though sometimes devious ones), and their function in the web of signification as precisely decipherable and turned toward ethical, political criticism. But this requires certain methodological restrictions. The apparent fascination or dread induced by certain photographs—what Barthes late in his career calls a photograph’s punctum, its “astonishment” (Camera Lucida 27 and 82)—is disregarded as a byproduct of ideological blindness. That is, nothing exceeds a critical reader’s
interpretive framework. No residue of meaning remains after interpretation; everything worthwhile (everything politically salient) has been spoken. It seems that affect itself becomes theoretically invisible.

More than any other point of contention in the field, I believe this one most forcefully separates expressivistic and cultural studies approaches. I again turn to Kress and van Leeuwen to demonstrate how deeply the role of affect divides approaches to the acts of looking and analysis. In an early collaborative essay, "Trampling All Over Our Unspoilt Spot: Barthes' 'Punctum' and the Politics of the Extrasemiotic," the authors undertake the tricky proposition of claiming Roland Barthes as an important intellectual ancestor (in *Mythologies*) but simultaneously of disclaiming his conception of the photograph (especially in *Camera Lucida*). Kress and van Leeuwen make no secret about their debt to Barthes' semiotics. On the other hand, they move vehemently away from his sense of the photograph as an affectively charged object that disturbs the systematic application of semiotic analysis.

To understand this avoidance on the part of Kress and van Leeuwen, it is important to recognize that from even his earliest publications, Barthes saw the photograph as a challenge to the traditional practice of semiotics. In agreement with Walter Benjamin's contention that camera technology has revolutionized the way the public experiences the act of looking, Barthes suspects that photography revolutionizes human consciousness. All written communication consists of a logical set of codes that link what is *really* in front of our eyes (the denotative message) with what *should* or *might* be seen (the connotative message). However, a photograph's denotative message
bears no “code” out of which to transmit its connotative message, as does written language. Barthes’ explanation is worth quoting at length:

Of all the structures of information, the photograph appears as the only one that is exclusively constituted and occupied by a ‘denoted’ message, a message which totally exhausts its mode of existence. In front of a photograph, the feeling of “denotation,” or, if one prefers, of analogical plenitude, is so great that the description of the photograph is literally impossible; to describe consists precisely in joining to the denoted message a relay or second-order message derived from a code which is that of language and constituting in relation to the photographic analogue, however much care one takes to be exact, a connotation: to describe is thus not simply to be imprecise or incomplete, it is to change structures, to signify something different from what is shown. (1977, 18)

Many visual modes of representation, such as painting, theater, or cinema, transmit their connotative meanings (the style of the image, which signifies a period or a region, the “art” and rhetoric of the image) almost simultaneously with their denotative (“analogue”) meanings, “in an immediate and obvious way,” Barthes argues (PM 17). Photography, on the other hand, paradoxically delivers its meaning only after it has been attended to by the cultural and grammatical codes of language. The “connoted (or coded) message” of a photograph, as Barthes phrases this paradox, “develops on the basis of a message without a code” (19).

This passage complicates Kress and van Leeuwen’s attempt to sift out Barthes’ fascination with visual pleasure from his materialist hermeneutics. While they “concur with Barthes in affirming the real, the authentic” (“without it,” they write, “semiotics is cast adrift in fashionable postmodern uncertainty,” 37), they are anxious about his claim “that the description of the photograph is literally impossible” (their words, not his), sensing in his love for certain photographs an attempt to protect certain discourses from critical analysis, especially discourses that touch upon visual pleasure and aesthetics in
general (37). This accusation of elitism is especially strong in their reading of *Camera Lucida*, where they see in Barthes’ *punctum* an attempt to set off aesthetic territory upon which semioticians cannot “trample” (36).

It seems nothing escapes their analysis. They assert that “everything the semiotician touches turns into the semiotic” and aim their Midas touch at Barthes’ text, warning us of the moral threat implicit in his turn against semiotics. Oddly enough, Kress and van Leeuwen suggest that student writing in particular is threatened by Barthes’ notion of the extrasemiotic. Speaking of the “specific [detrimental] political effects” (37) of the idea of the *punctum*, they look toward the college writing course: “if ‘the best writing’ is inexplicable within the banality of semiotic terms, the teaching of writing in schools can only hope to reproduce an elite which has access to the constitution of writing by other means” (38). This implies that the uncritical acceptance of photographic pleasure furthers an unjust, inequitable society. This argument implies, in other words, that only social semiotics can help writing pedagogy deal ethically with the image.

The aspirations of this claim will be a bit confusing for any teacher who does not use semiotic terms in the teaching of writing. I occasionally do, and still find this confusing—the assumption that denying “the social, the semiotic ... is the currently dominant and most damaging myth” (38). What gets damaged? According to the authors, it is social justice, undermined by the elusive mysticism of Barthes’ language of “escape,” his skill with writing hidden beneath the “magic” of photography (*Camera Lucida* 88). But a close reading of Barthes does not expose, to this reader, an oppressive bourgeois academic hoping to fend off the illiterate masses. Barthes launches an audacious attack on semiotic theory as it is usually practiced in the academy. Kress and
van Leeuwen rightly point out that whatever is extra-semiotic can be looked at by the
semitician, codified, analyzed, and interpreted according to an elaborate, systematized
discourse. There is no reason to think Barthes would disagree. But they have missed or
ignored the significance of affect—in Barthes’ words, “desire, repulsion, nostalgia,
euphoria, … mourning” (21), “love, compassion, grief, enthusiasm” (113)—which is
central to so much of Barthes’ thinking and, one might assume, to everyday life. If
anything has been damaged, it is the strength of Composition theory to address this
capricious, accidental, adventurous aspect of looking at photographs.

The Photograph Returns: Affect and the Puncturing of Semiotic Perspective

To ask whether a photograph is analogical or coded is not a good means of
analysis. The important thing is that the photograph possesses an evidential
force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time. From a
phenomenological viewpoint, in the Photograph, the power of authentication
exceeds the power of representation.

—Barthes, Camera Lucida (88-89)

In Camera Lucida Barthes attempts to find the “genius” of the photograph, the
“essential feature” by which it can “be distinguished from the community of images” (3).
He employs the analytical insights of semiotics to understand the medium but also pays
close attention to the affective spark (the punctum) produced by certain images. More
specifically, Barthes begins with a private goal: he desires a way to extract, from a large
stash of old family photos, the essence or “unique being” of his mother, who had died just
before he began writing this, his last book. The results of his search explain his
distinction between a photograph’s studium, which comprises all the information about
history and culture in a photo that allows us to make general sense of it, and its punctum,
which is the emotional disturbance caused when certain details in a photograph trigger an unconscious association in the viewer—an accident or adventure of looking, an unexpected *punctum* or *punctuation* of one’s look (26-27). The idea of the *punctum* allows Barthes to account for a subtle, fleeting, nearly inexplicable moment of looking at photographs that is often excluded from the gaze of social semiotics.

In the narrative climax of *Camera Lucida*, Barthes writes of perusing a shoebox of old family snapshots after his mother had died, hoping to find photos of her that could communicate her “essence.” At first, this search produced no true recognition. “I never recognized her except in fragments [that is, familiar poses and facial expressions], which is to say that I missed her *being*, and that therefore I missed her altogether” (65-66). After days of disappointment, however, he finally found what he calls “the Winter Garden Photograph,” an image of his mother as a child. Taken by an anonymous photographer, it exists for him as

a supererogatory photograph which contained more than what the technical being of photography can reasonably offer.... I could not express [my simultaneous elation at finding this image] and my grief at her death ... except by an infinite series of adjectives, which I omit, convinced however that this photograph collected all possible predicates from which my mother’s being was constituted. ... The Winter Garden Photograph was indeed essential, it achieved for me, utopically, *the impossible science of the unique being*. (71, italics in original)

Barthes strives here for an understanding of subjectivity that can grasp the elusive moment of being pierced by such an image—not because of any apparent anxiety about low-brow culture or the disenfranchised, but because conventional semiotics ignores these feelings and sensations, which are so central to the experience of being moved by a photograph. That is, the Winter Garden Photograph stages an “extrasemiotic” moment of precisely the sort Kress and van Leeuwen fear and disdain. Its semiotic analysis is,
indeed, partially non-interpretable, due to this paradoxical fact: it highlights a child’s enduring attachment to his deceased parent, but also the irrationality of this attachment. “She is lost,” the photograph announces. But also, “She continues to exist.” Barthes uses this melancholic encounter to define the genius of photography: it is a visual technology that powerfully confirms life and death, presence and absence, at the same time. We can say that the *punctum* of a photograph expresses what is hinted at but absent, what is pointed at but not shown, in the image. The desire of social semiotics to derive only positive information from visual analysis would force us to ignore or disavow this aspect of photography. If the camera can produce affective disturbances such as Barthes describes, then every photograph is a potential *memento mori*, a shard from the past that can call a viewer to meditate on the paradoxically entwined forces of loss and presence, of past and present. It can thus provide positive cultural data but sometimes also profoundly disturb one’s ability to distinguish positively between reality then and reality now.

We don’t have to be ensnared in grief to grasp the technical accuracy and philosophical ingenuity of this definition.

Technically, there is an essential confusion in the semiosis of photography each time the camera’s shutter is operated. Light bounces off the subject and enters the aperture of the camera, imprinting on the film or the image-sensor the precise physical contours (of a landscape, a face, a body) seen in front of the camera’s lens. This allows for two claims: (1) the photograph is an *icon* that stands in for (represents) an absent image, idea, or person; (2) it is also an *index*, an object which points to and gives presence to its subject. More specifically, the photo as icon is a representation of the
subject (distant from the subject itself), like a painted portrait, made up of a series of gestures (that is, having certain aesthetic intentions; made from a certain angle and with a certain depth of field, with a precise focal setting, exposure time, contrast, hue and saturation; framed and perhaps captioned) that can often be historicized and ideologically “decoded.” (Many images by Ansel Adams, for example, might be seen as icons of the “natural” “American” “landscape.”) But a photo is also an indexical piece of the subject, like “palm prints, death masks, cast shadows, the Shroud of Turin, or the tracks of gulls on beaches,” as Rosalind Krauss puts it (L’Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism 31). The photographic process, because of its machine-precise channeling of light, allows us to confront reality in a way that is impossible for non-photographic visual modes. No “painted portrait,” Barthes writes, “supposing that it seemed ‘true’ to me, could compel me to believe its referent had really existed” (77). In the photograph, on the other hand, it is “not a question of exactitude, but of reality,” for the photograph is “literally an emanation of the referent” (80): a “sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed” (81). This explains why only photography seems to achieve “the impossible science of the unique being.”

Philosophically: photography’s icon/index dualism calls for a new approach to the old boundary between reality and representation. To understand this claim, it is crucial to understand the relation of present time to historical time. In her reading of Plato’s allegory of the cave, Susan Sontag wrote that the camera seems to fragment a sense of history as continuous and ongoing—it promotes a world view “which denies interconnectedness, continuity, but which confers on each moment the character of a
mystery," just as fire and shadows make reality discontinuous and mystifying for Plato’s
cave dwellers (On Photography 23)—and for this reason photography isn’t capable of
moral instruction. Sontag insisted that only “that which narrates can make us
understand,” meaning that understanding require a sense of duration, of anecdotes, stories
and arguments unfolding over time. Photography, she wrote, makes it difficult to
remember that our lives in the present are contiguous with what we know or sense as
“History.” Barthes, on the other hand, sees this ability to fragment history as the camera’s
greatest strength. “History is a memory fabricated according to positive formulas, a pure
intellectual discourse which abolishes mythic Time,” he writes, whereas “the Photograph
is a certain but fugitive testimony” (93). That is, photography can bear witness to the
fragility of subjective experience, which is generally invisible to positive (positivistic)
narratives of historical progress.

This resonates with John Berger and Jean Mohr’s argument in Another Way of
Telling. Barthes’ Berger and Mohr speak of “summit moments,” akin to Barthes’
punctum, in a human life (“moments of achievement, trance, dream, passion, … prowess,
ear-death, sacrifice, mourning”), which “are intrinsic to the relation imagination/time”
(106). Like the punctum, these moments cut across the seamless narrative coherence of
“historical progress,” which, Berger and Mohr assert, has done “deep violence … to
subjective experience” (107). Fortunately, “people are never only the passive objects of
history” (108). Given this phrasing, it isn’t surprising that they embrace personal
photographs as an important part of the ethical imagination: “Hundreds of millions of
photographs, fragile images, often carried next to the heart or placed by the side of the
bed, are used to refer to that which historical time has no right to destroy” (108). Note
that Berger, whose *Ways of Reading* has been portrayed as the ground zero of critical Visual Studies in Composition, here provides a bracing critique of any visual ethics that disregards personal images. Furthermore, against Sontag’s demand for a coherent narrative of moral instruction, Berger contends that “a photograph’s lack of intentionality becomes its strength, its lucidity” (125), and that it offers “a coherence which, instead of narrating, instigates ideas” (128).

In brief, Barthes and Berger insist that photographs, especially but not exclusively personal images, can be catalysts for ethical thought. This goes against the prevailing logic of social semiotics, where an emphasis on “the personal” is usually seen as an avoidance of larger social and historical problems. On the contrary, personal photographs create a visual space that can salvage individual subjectivity from the crushing anonymity of history. The positivistic historical data that photographs produce have frequently been used to identify, manage, and even to “frame” (i.e., to misrepresent and wrongfully accuse) individuals. It has also “framed” individuals within views of history that seem to erase subjective experience. As Laura Wexler puts it, although photography has the power to destroy lives, it also bears the “capacity to envision” new ones: “The right to see and be seen, in one’s own way and under one’s own terms, has been [domestic photography’s] point of contention” (299). By situating affect as a significant part of our relationship with photography, Barthes and Berger show us that we can make personal images speak back to and resist positivistic misuses of the camera. This is as much to say that any photograph, even one from a family album, can become a political device, in as much as it can weaken historical narratives that tend to reduce and marginalize subjective experience.
The idea that personal photos have some sort of political or critical value is not universally accepted in Composition Studies. For example, in “Photography: A Writer’s Tool for Thinking, Rendering, and Revising,” Vincent Miholic uses only “public” photographs to help students sharpen their critical thinking skills. He wants to make use of the analogical plenitude of the medium (i.e., all the details visual scene), but imposes strict limits on the kind of images to be used, refusing “autobiographical” photos in particular. He implies that autobiographical images resist critical thinking: “While old photographs are potent archives for autobiographical reflection, the primary function of the camera and the photographic process is to aid the eye and mind in seeing differently” (26). This seems to me an unnecessarily restrictive understanding of the medium and of autobiography. In the first place, any photograph can be used to establish uniformity in public perception, and can work against critical thinking. This is the function of propaganda, of much advertising, and probably of much journalistic and documentary photography. Secondly, autobiographical images also have a long history of introducing difference into public vision. A case in point is the work of visual artists who collect anonymous personal photos and, by juxtaposing them in large collections of similar images, create a disorienting sense of the human being as an image-collecting animal (e.g., Christian Boltanski’s found images in his “Lessons of Darkness,” and Joachim Schmid’s “Photographic Garbage Survey Project”). In such contexts, personal images are used to profound rhetorical effect, altering the viewer’s sense of how photography reflects or refracts “reality.”

Miholic is suspicious of the autobiographical impulse—charged as it is with affect and too many subjective world views—and worried about the ethical value of personal
photography. This anxiety can be sensed in much of the pedagogy of cultural studies. But Composition scholars are increasingly using both personal photographs and autobiography to encourage progressive social thought. For instance, Wendy Hesford begins her book, *Framing Identities: Autobiography and the Politics of Pedagogy*, with a thorough and compelling analysis of a nineteenth-century photo of her great-grandfather.

A young, sober-faced white man sits in a small, domestic space and gazes with "detachment" into the distance (3). Next to him stands a black youth who stares directly into the camera, and who, we are made to assume, is a servant to the seated man. Regarding her own description of this image, Hesford writes that "its focus on what can be seen could be interpreted as a controlling act that reinforces the domestic order of the room.... Yet what is not seen is as much a part of the context of the photograph as what is seen" (3). In other words, rather than simply repeating the detached, dominating gaze of Western imperialism, Hesford draws out of this image a retrospective act of historical resistance. Under her critical gaze, the power of the photograph to stop time flickers, and the image speaks out against itself. What is not seen becomes vital. The visual traces of imperialism—the young white man’s detached posture, the black youth’s attentive gaze, the difference between their clothing—are fractured and made to betray their historical origins, and the picture’s “other,” the black youth, has suddenly become a subject, one whose gaze ferociously returns our own. Hesford demonstrates that this practice of inverting the gaze has ethical implications for how we commemorate the past. She shows how the image of her great-grandfather and of the boy “monumentalized, commemorated, and reproduced an idealized image of [her] family and its value” (6). This family image now marks a dark spot in Hesford’s sense of her personal history, but
it is a blemish that radiates a fuller knowledge of her “shifting roles as author—great-granddaughter and keeper of the tales (a generational space that involves feelings of betrayal as much as pride), teacher, and social critic—and the cultural and social narratives that shape [her] authorial location” (4).

We find a rather different approach to photographs in the work of Tom Romano. Though Romano’s main area of research has been multi-genre writing, he offers specific insights into photography. Romano defines multi-genre writing as “a complex, multilayered, multi-voiced blend of genres, each revealing information about [the writer’s] topic, each self-contained, making a point of its own, unconnected to other genres by conventional transitional devices” (4). Such writing consists of “genre snapshots,” an indication of his fondness for photography (4), which are produced by *showing not telling*—a phrase used to describe the imaginative recasting of visual experience. Vision precedes the multi-genre essay. In seemingly diametric opposition to the social view, in which all images are “turned into” text, Romano encourages peeling back written text to reveal a sequence of photographs.

A photograph is only one more “genre snapshot” in this model, albeit a rare and suggestive one. A photograph may be all there is to say about a topic, Romano suggests, but when necessary, students can also “use a photograph as a creative springboard to dive deeply with language into a topic” (100). Photos provide a mysterious, fruitful kind of tension when placed next to (when rubbing against) language, inciting an inexplicable pleasure, an *adventure*, in writing: “The very act of using language to describe the image often leads the writer to surprising perceptions and understanding” (100). Word and image are placed next to each other in importance and on the page. For Romano, the
photographic image is joined with the written text to provide a richer, more poignant, detail-saturated narrative that exceeds the power that either medium can achieve on its own.

This Process-oriented understanding of the photograph is also related to Barthes' notion of the punctum. Romano confirms this when he says: “Genres of narrative thinking require writers to be concrete and precise. They can’t just tell in abstract language. … They must show. They must make their topics palpable. They must penetrate” (26; my emphasis after tell). On this understanding of the photograph, the body is linked to an erotics of vision. Tom Newkirk connects “spectatorship” even more explicitly with “pleasure,” which is “rooted,” he writes, “in perception more than conception, in the visual more than the intellectual, in looking outward more than inward, in amusement and delight more than in self-improvement” (The Performance of Self 73). This might explain why so much Process pedagogy readily accepts the photograph as a distinct form of representation, and why critical pedagogies are suspicious of it: pleasure taken in visual forms resembles voyeurism, and voyeurism is a perversity that seems to run counter to the goals and tenor of progressive social action. But Romano’s and Newkirk’s “sensualist” approach differs significantly from voyeurism or crude hedonism. The pleasure they take in looking is completely open and communal, intended to be shared and transmitted in academic settings. For this pragmatic approach, pleasure has a payoff—its ability to get the largest number of students to look, and look closely, at material reality. In this sense an erotics of vision is also a social program.

It seems that this social impulse toward visual pleasure is ancient. The photograph, Andre Bazin wrote, is an object that triggers a primal desire for reality in the
realm of the image. Bazin speculated that this psychic demand for the corporeal body in our representations (he calls it the "mummy-complex") has driven the creation of visual art throughout history. This would not only explain why the invention of photography so nearly coincided with the birth of impressionistic painting—that is, because the camera made Renaissance realism in painting unnecessary—but also why ancient religions created small representations of the human form to be placed in the tomb alongside the corpse and for other funereal rites. "The religion of ancient Egypt, aimed against death," Bazin writes, "saw survival as depending on the continued existence of the corporeal body" (237). Bazin further observes that "the Holy Shroud of Turin combines features alike of relic and photograph" (244). That is, religion and art are both driven by a compulsion for "the flesh," which the camera gives. To push this one step further, since every funeral is a social experience, and every photograph is funereal, then every photograph takes part in a social experience—though a strange and liminal one, marked by the ambiguities of loss and presence.

Between Hesford's socio-personal criticism and Romano's sensualist communalism, we have two very different approaches to photography. But they share an interest in the photo as a unique rhetorical space, one that merges language, the image, affect, and an actual piece of the past. Hesford’s use of her family image opens a space that shows us how imperialism in the past shaped her personal life in the present. Romano’s images help us imagine the affective lives of his students and ask us to connect those lives to the lives of other students in future classrooms. This suggests that both approaches use flat, two-dimensional photos to create a multi-dimensional rhetoric that welds social modes of being with modes that are undoubtedly highly personal. The
particular photographs Hesford and Romano have chosen to discuss, and the way they discuss them, combine affect with social awareness, in a way that remains sensitive to the unique rhetorical needs of each writer. This is exactly what I hope writing students can get from a photo-pedagogy—a sense of their subjective experiences somehow accumulating around the image, of a past coming to life, and of new narrative and rhetorical possibilities emerging.

I don’t intend this chapter to vilify social semiotics, but only to point out that there is an essential (ontological and epistemological) feature of photography that often goes unaddressed. We don’t need a highly specialized discourse to understand this essential feature. People who have grown up around photographs are likely to have an ingrained sense of it. Broadly characterized, it is that a photograph creates the feeling of a link between the local and the universal, the physical and the metaphysical, the banal and the mysterious. Of all modes of representation that are both icons and indices—death masks, thumbprints, holy relics—the photo is the most popular.

This is to say that looking at photographs, even privately, is a communal event. In the making of pictures, in their critical (academic) reception, and even in their passive reception, photography is social. We encounter it, with varying degrees of awareness, in particular places and particular social contexts. I first encountered camera work in the 1970s, when my father started taking pictures as a hobby. My family spent many nights sitting on the couch in our darkened living room, listening to the whir and click of the slide projector as image after image cast light and shadows around the room: cloudscapes outside the window of the airplane my dad chartered; an old woman crossing the street; Blackie, the family dog, jumping into the ocean; my sisters and I playing on the beach.
We laughed occasionally as my father narrated the parade of images, or when my mother cracked a joke; but mostly we just sat together and looked. Of course, this is only one of many ways private viewers absorb photography as a social event. I myself was not seriously interested in taking pictures myself until my son was born. Then it became something of an obsession, a ferociously powerful impulse to produce images of him, which were then avidly shared with everybody around me.

This is an anecdotal way of suggesting that when teachers ask how students feel about a picture, we are not looking for a solipsistic response, as George implies is the case with expressivistic pedagogies. It is simply a way of finding the social dimensions of personal experience. A pedagogy of photography asks students to “go public” with their notions of what is beautiful, repulsive, melancholy, or joyful, in order to achieve a fuller understanding of how, and to what ends, visual culture operates in their lives. Conversely, our critical examinations of popular photography help us better understand private experience. This approach to photo pedagogy is grounded in the belief that prioritizing the personal dimension of experience over the social, or vice versa, does not do justice to the holistic nature of our intellectual and affective lives. Both dimensions are fully collaborative, both can be explored with creative and critical strategies, and work in one dimension leads us to reflect on the other.

The Social Practice of Private Looking: A Photo Essay Project in Four Parts

To help students engage this kind of intellectual/affective/communal work, I have a four-part assignment that investigates the relation of public photographs to private ways
of looking. The entire project is broken into two halves. The first half has to do explicitly with looking at and making photographs, the second half is the writing.

Part 1 of the assignment asks students to bring to class three different definitions of art, from whatever three sources they can find. I ask them to type this up and to include an end comment that explains which definition they find most persuasive, and why. They are encouraged to peruse online archives to get a sense of which images they find most "art-like." (I offer starter sites—www.metmuseum.org, www.moma.org, www.artcyclopedia.com, www.0100101110101101.org, www.photomontage.com, www.illegal-art.org, www.rhizome.org—but they usually find more on their own.) After we’ve discussed their definitions of art in class, I introduce them to four artists who mark significant moments in modern photography: Gertrude Käsebier (Pictorialism), Imogen Cunningham (the "Straight" photography of Group f/64), Robert Frank (The Americans), and William Eggleston (William Eggleston's Guide). A large number of their photographs can be found online, so with a laptop and internet access we can view them in class. If the classroom is not set up with an A/V connection, the photographers’ books can simply be passed around. This, however, is a poor compromise, since looking at the images together confirms the social nature of our work.

The overall goals of this project are for students to think seriously about their aesthetic predispositions, and to start writing about the visual world in such a way that these predispositions become an open question rather than a matter of unfounded opinion. Beauty may be in the eye of the beholder, but this sentiment is fairly useless for understanding why one image strikes us as more beautiful (or repulsive or boring) than another.
This is where the four photographers come in. Sequenced in the way they’re listed above, they provide a nice illustration of a few important aesthetic shifts in America—from Pictorialism in the 1920s, to “straight” photography in the 30s, to Frank’s quirky focusing, low lighting, and cynical take on America in the 50s, and finally to the saturated colors and thematic banality of Eggleston’s campy 1970s America. While each of these moments are historically important, this brief chronology gets most interesting with Eggleston, who is widely considered to have legitimized color photography as an art form. Most students tend to see black-and-white as the more appropriate mode for camera art. They also tend to see Eggleston’s images as boring at first, since they often focus on mundane places and objects: an uneventful front door with a basket of flowers hanging on the knocker; the dingy gray exterior of what might be a deserted building; a close-up of an open oven; a jacket clumsily hanging on a dirty wall. (Go to http://www.egglestontrust.com to peruse a few images from Eggleston’s collected works.)

By looking carefully, however, we are able to notice some rather striking things about Eggleston’s style. We begin to see that the contrast and texture we lost in going from black-and-white to color, is replaced by a vibrant visual dynamic that makes the images almost menacing. Also, as John Szarkowski writes in the introduction to William Eggleston’s Guide, we begin to see “a style not inappropriate for photographs that might be introduced as evidence in court” (11). In their banality, we find a simplicity that begins to transform into complexity. And yet, as Barthes and others have pointed out, these photographs do not speak. To “translate these appearances into words is surely a fool’s errand,” Szarkowski writes, and “no two fools would choose the same
unsatisfactory words” (12). Eggleston’s photographs don’t have a narrative or a moral. They seem instead to exist for the sake of existing, as if form and content were synonymous (10-12), and as if “verbal descriptions are finally gratuitous” (13). But Szarkowski keeps moving, keeps offering his words, teaching us that to write is to accept the challenge photography gives us, to dance with it rather than be silenced by it. There is no progressive social commentary he can pull from these photographs, finding in them instead “the familiar modern vices” and some “of the ancient ones” as well. “This could not be called progress,” he realizes, “but it is interesting” (14).

But there is a kind of progress here. When students engage this conversation about the intersection of form (saturated colors, banal Composition) and content (the gritty, plastic, neon landscape of post-60s Americana), they must grapple with social aesthetics from a personal perspective. And they must open their private views to the aesthetic “paradigms” that constitute art production in America (Eggleston 14). Not all students come to enjoy Eggleston’s images (most do), but the point is that we collectively interrogate and stir up our notions of beauty and art. Indeed, I may talk with students about how these photographs make them feel, but also about where these feelings come from (the depth of subjective experience) and what the subjective experience of looking at the images can build (an American Imaginary). That is, there is progress because Eggleston’s work is interesting. By taking pleasure in looking at and conversing about these images, we are learning how to feel about them, to immerse ourselves in their affective contexts. And, of course, we are learning to take a rhetorical position, as Szarkowski did so profoundly, amidst the ocean of images filling our visual universe.
Part 2 of this assignment requires students to make their own pictures. They will take pictures of people, things, and spaces on campus. Looked at together and in a certain sequence, these images should reveal the zeitgeist of university life, as each student sees it. We begin by discussing the formal aspects of the photographs we’ve observed. Since not all students have access to expensive cameras—most use their cell phones, the rest purchase disposables—I restrict this instruction to light and framing, two formal properties which do not require sophisticated technical equipment.

**Light**

This is our first and most important technical discussion. We think about the different types of light and the different ways in which they can both challenge and benefit the photographer.

1. **Bright light:** the sun is at its highest, providing neither a distinct light source nor distinct shadows.
2. **Directional light:** there is bright light but also deep shadow.
3. **Diffuse light:** there is a range of difference between light and shadow.
4. **Artificial light:** tends to be very dim or, with direct flash, too harsh. “There are two kinds of light,” James Thurber wrote, “the glow that illuminates, and the glare that obscures.” Understanding this distinction is the backbone of camera work.

**Framing and Composition**

The scene through a camera’s viewfinder is not immediately meaningful. For somebody not used to that cramped view of the world, it can look like an indiscriminate
fog of visual information. The usual way to make an image meaningful is to place its subject right in the center of the frame. This method, common to birthday parties and vacations to foreign cities, is meant to record an event, not to sustain or challenge a viewer's gaze. As soon as we pay attention to the space around the subject, however, we have started composing. A few things to remember about framing:

(1) The Rule of Thirds. Imagine that the photograph's visual space is divided into three equal parts by two sets of parallel lines—one set horizontal, the other vertical (basically an invisible tic-tac-toe board). This produces four intersecting points. Place the subject of the photo on one of these four, off-set points. Not centering the subject of the photo can make it more interesting by creating visual "tension." Move the camera around just slightly between exposures to see the difference this makes in overall composition. What activates the corners of the image, and what is in the middle?

(2) Patterns and symmetries. Try to guide the viewer's attention around the space of the image. Where are the leading lines? Can you find diagonals, triangles, circles, or ovals that draw the eye toward your subject? Use these lines and geometries to create a sense of movement.

(3) Depth of field. How does the difference between foreground and background emphasize your subject? Think in terms of layers. Can an object in the background frame something in the foreground, and vice versa?

(4) Experiment with blank space, which can be just as effective as filled space in managing the image's spatial relationships.

We are now ready to start taking pictures. Here is a fun assignment which helps students try on the aesthetic ideas we've been discussing.
Sample Assignment #1

Making Pictures for Essay #1: Photography Scavenger Hunt

Make at least 90 exposures, 10 per category, and choose the single best from each category to bring to class. This means you'll bring in 9 images total. Don't forget to do the cliché!

1) ______ A cliché

2) ______ Portrait of a gentleman
    ______ Portrait of a lady
    ______ Self-portrait featuring reflections

3) ______ An artist at work
    ______ An administrator wearing funny glasses but not posing
    ______ People in the wrong place (at the right time?)
    ______ A philosopher being stumped

4) ______ A picture within a picture
    ______ The word "keystone"
    ______ A person holding a camera who doesn't know they're being photographed

5) ______ A large animal or Poppin' Fresh or Bibendum
    ______ A gun
    ______ A physics classroom or chalkboard
    ______ An organized space

6) ______ Something upside-down
    ______ A locker room or a bathroom
    ______ A change in time

7) ______ Three people in the frame, all doing different things
    ______ A happy person who does not look happy
    ______ A transaction, or a person eating
    ______ A person who looks like somebody famous, but make us guess who the famous person is

8) ______ An interesting corner
    ______ A tree that looks like a person flying
    ______ A person made out of paper clips or matches
    ______ Weather

9) ______ Something that does not make any sense
    ______ An important item
    ______ An empty house or building
    ______ Distorted scale
    ______ A tangle of limbs
    ______ A recurring dream

Fig. 1. Sample Assignment #1
The scavenger hunt lets students experiment with some of the core aesthetic strategies of the graphic and visual arts. Each student becomes a culture designer, looking at objects, bodies, movements, and public spaces as if they were artistic tools that could express their unique vision. In this sense, the activity is a way to make social data personally meaningful: to a certain extent, social life is comprised of personal visions. However, it also helps students do more than passively receive the institutional spaces and material practices that surround them. In other words, the scavenger hunt also helps them see that their private feelings about beauty and art are not entirely their own. (Notice that the first task on the list is to “find” a cliché, which is meant to demonstrate that, perhaps, much of what we experience aesthetically pleasing is actually experienced by many others.) To a certain extent, then, our private visions are socially constructed.

After they have collected, edited, and organized their photographs, they begin the essay portion of the assignment. The writing consists of two parts, Parts 3 and 4. In Part 3, they write a brief paragraph for each of the nine images, summarizing their photographic work as well as answering self-evaluative questions: Did you run into technical or conceptual issues that had to be resolved? Which photographer or classroom discussion shaped your project? If you’d had more time to flesh out this project, what would you have done differently? I let them know this is a low stakes task graded on a pass/fail basis, and ask them to keep the writing informal, in the style of journal entries.

In Part 4 of the project, they write a reflective essay dealing with the visual and social culture of the university. It is here that I challenge them to thread together our conversations about photographic aesthetics, the material practices of the university, and their personal reflections on visual beauty and life at college.
Sample Assignment #2

Making Narrative for Essay #1: Your Visual Discovery of the University, in Words

Essay prompt

You’ve looked at many interesting photographs from the last century and have applied the techniques you found there to your own images. Now, use the pictures you’ve taken as the backbone for an essay about your first semester at college. Some questions to get you started: How have you changed since arriving here, as an intellectual and as a citizen of this new community? Is this life anything like you expected it to be? In what ways? If not, how is it different? What experiences have you had that allow you to re-see who you were when you first arrived?

The tone of this essay can be personal and reflective, meaning you are welcome to use the “I” voice, personal anecdotes, and a collage/montage format. I also want you to be analytical here: perform a close reading of at least one of the photographs you include in the essay, using the critical terms and strategies we’ve practiced in class.

Also, think about how the images will be positioned relative to the writing. Will you frontload them, like Walker Evans’s does in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, or will you put them all at the end, as John Berger and Jean Mohr do in Another Way of Telling? Will you spread them out evenly, as Lawrence Sutin does in A Postcard Memoir? Or, will you intersperse them randomly like Paul Auster in The Invention of Solitude? Also, will you caption them or refer to them in the body of the essay? These creative decisions are just as important to the meaning of the essay as the written narrative itself.

Note: Of the 9 final images you picked, choose 5 to 7 to be included in the essay. Choose images that display your unique visual style. They will be woven into the written portion of the essay, and the final draft will be posted to your wordpress.org blog. Your peers and I will comment on them there.

Figure 2. Sample Assignment #2

The most poignant and culturally relevant essays I have read as a teacher of college Composition have been those in which students make use of the ambiguous nature of the photograph—its dual role as aesthetic object and factual document, its capacity to haunt and be haunted by written narrative. Every photographic image can become an object of critical analysis—magazine advertisements, family photos, yearbook photos, mug shots, anonymous or “found” images, self-portraits, a shot captured two minutes ago on one’s cell phone—as well as an object of aesthetic reflection, uncannily shining the past into the present. It is this infidelity of a photograph’s semiosis, its
inherent capacity to make present the body of the past, which suits the medium so well to teaching writing in the age of “the pictorial turn,” to use W. J. T. Mitchell’s phrase (11). The best essays that come out of the four-part project I’ve just described make full use of the photograph, merging subjective experience with sophisticated visual practices. For these writers the personal and the public, the pleasurable and the critical, are stitched together into a holistic process. There is no reason not to free photography from its strangely unremarkable slot in Visual Studies and to recognize, once again, its unique value for college writing instruction.
CHAPTER II

"VISIBLE THINGS" AND BEYOND: PHOTOGRAPHY, VOICE, AND THE PERSONAL NARRATIVE

[Are] we so certain that autobiography depends on reference, as a photograph depends on its subject?

—Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-facement" (920)

Autobiographical texts and photographs likewise indicate both an absence (of the body) and a presence (of life); they announce life in the midst of death as much as they anticipate death in the midst of life.

—Linda Haverty Rugg, Picturing Ourselves (27)

Each photo I look at in each album tells a different story than does my memory. ... For me this is the mystery of the photograph.

—"Silent Photographs"

The idea that the personal experiences of students should inform writing instruction is old news. Near the end of nineteenth century, fueled by the ideological climate that gave rise to John Dewey’s progressivism, college Compositionists, as Gertrude Buck observed in 1901, tended to “derive subjects for writing from the student’s own experience, rather than from sources foreign to his knowledge or interest” (quoted in Brereton 241). Even as early as 1875, as Bob Connors writes in his history of the personal writing assignment, the “feelings, experiences, thoughts, and appreciations of the writer [came] to have a centrality and power in rhetorical education” (170). Holistic, experience-based pedagogies were edging out the more formal, formulaic, recitation-
based pedagogies that had once dominated college education (Kitzhaber 61). As Connors puts it, the “classical approach” to education shifted toward “a rhetorical praxis far more personal, private, intimate” (169). This aspect of our pedagogical ancestry is also Don Bialostosky’s subject when, reviewing the famous debate between Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae, he detects an echo of the “two-hundred-year debate opened by romanticism” regarding the difference between poetic (expressive) and scientific (socially constructed) knowledge (“Romantic Resonances” 93). Nathan Crick’s review of the Elbow/Bartholomae debate reaches even further back, using Dewey’s *Art as Experience* to argue that “the first interpretation of the Genesis myth” was actually the first time creativity was cast into doubt, since interpreters were uncertain if God created the world out of nothing (from within), or out of the raw, “universal discourse of the Word” (from without) (“Composition as Experience” 255).

This chapter is more concerned with sketching out a theory than a history, but we can at least pause here and observe that when “Romantic” is used in Composition literature, it often refers to the pioneers of the Process Movement, and it is generally not a term of praise (e.g., Berlin’s *Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century American Colleges*). In her *CCCC* Chair’s address of 1989, Andrea Lunsford summed up the term’s negative connotations:

> We need to realize the extent to which writing was necessary for the invention of the self, usually dated during the 12th century, the reification of that self in the Romantic ‘author,’ and its crossing to America as rugged individualism, self-reliance, and intellectual property, constructs which, as we know, have vested power in some groups while withholding power from others. (“Composing Ourselves” 73)

This capsule history insists that Romanticism, reliant on a conception of self passed down from the Middle Ages, became an oppressive force in American culture and
expressivistic pedagogy. It implies that the concept of "voice"—long the most popular term of expressivist pedagogy, a metonym for the self and its authorial "presence"—is insufficient for explaining how meaning gets made in writing, and that it might even contribute to unethical cultural behaviors and habits of mind. Ostensibly, the notion of "voice," as it has been used by the likes of Walker Gibson and Ken Macrorie is a hegemonic assertion of bourgeois power, all the more insidious because of its apparent avoidance of political discourse. Darsie Bowden, in *The Mythology of Voice*, tries to bury the concept for good with her contention that poststructuralism has made "voice a kind of dinosaur" (60).

In any case, Romanticism, it would seem, is conspicuously tied to Composition's origins, through the figure of voice and its production of an authorial "self." Such a criticism of voice feels a bit overstated, and this chapter evaluates its effectiveness in meeting the aesthetic and social demands of Composition today. To do this, I examine how the notion of voice, as an embodiment of the reification of self, interacts with photography. In this way, we can formulate questions that problematize an oversimplified dualism between "expressive" and "social" conceptions of personal writing: How does the notion of a self, and of a clear authorial voice, relate to the visual? How does a photograph inflect one's voice and one's representation of personal experience? In the familiar poststructural critique of subjectivity, which is often presented as a critique of voice, what is the photograph's role? Whereas Chapter I suggested that in descriptive writing, the image precedes the word (e.g., in the pedagogy of Tom Romano), this chapter investigates how photography develops a narrative voice.
Toward a Definition of Personal Narrative

In this chapter, I am examining the relation between photography and personal writing assignments in Composition. Let's try another tentative definition of personal writing. Note first the filial relation of students' personal writing to canonical autobiography, which Philippe Lejeune defines, tongue firmly in postmodern cheek (121), as "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (4). And according to Anne Ruggles Gere, more or less all "personal writing," whether called "personal narrative, personal experience essay," or "autobiographical writing," is "prose that gives significant attention to the writer's experiences and feelings" (204). We might also refer to it as a budding form of "creative nonfiction," which conveys the genre's emphasis on style and craft. It might also be considered memoir writing. (The OED does not confirm him on this point, but Gore Vidal nonetheless asserts that "A memoir is how one remembers one's own life, while an autobiography is history, requiring research, dates, facts double-checked," 5.) These terms can be more finely distinguished. For instance, a "personal essay" can be construed as a literary essay à la Montaigne or E. B. White, and an autobiography is often assumed to be a book-length publication. Nevertheless, for the sake of simplicity, I will use the four words, personal, autobiographical, interchangeably, as I think Gere does, as well as the words essay and narrative. The more important observation is that both Gere's and Lejeune's definitions imply a transcription of experience into language and of language into meaning, a complicated assumption we will address below.
Also, these definitions do not account for the materiality of autobiography, which becomes a complicated matter whenever words, photographs and other non-linguistic modes are combined within the autobiographical space. For many undergraduate students today, it is a space that is increasingly non-academic. My definition of personal narrative, then, also takes into consideration the visual and multimodal practices in which students are often heavily immersed outside of the classroom. Note the omnipresence of a few of the more popular social networking sites online, such as Bebo, BlackPlanet, Facebook, and Myspace. These sites allow for, encourage, and often require at least rudimentary manipulations of visual design, music, and networking software. Users weave verbal, filmic, and phonic texts into jocular, intimate, sentimental, eroticized, erudite, brooding, or menacing self-portraits. One’s homepage can be designed as a dating résumé, an advertisement for one’s band, a place to air one’s quasi-philosophical musings and political rants, or a graffiti wall—in other words, it is a self-portrait crafted according to new developments in software, a relatively new social context, and by the angle of a personal style. While not the kind of personal writing expected or required in many Composition courses, these technologically mediated, hyper-social spaces produce acts of self-referentiality unprecedented on this scale, and that are only recently becoming objects of extensive literacy research. As Kathleen Blake Yancey wrote in 2004: “Never before has the proliferation of writings outside the academy so counterpointed the Compositions inside” (“Made Not Only in Words” 298).

Of course, this defines material and social conditions that can easily pertain to any mode and genre of student writing. I emphasize them here in order to highlight the indirect and covert ways a personal essay accrues meaning from sources other than the
personal. Which is to say, a personal narrative narrates more than just the story of the writer’s personality. In this way my attempt at a definition of personal narrative enters the disagreement—famously articulated between Elbow and Bartholomae, but also manifesting itself throughout the history of Composition and across various areas of interest (see Berlin 1984, Tobin 1994, Matsuda 2003, and Fulkerson 2005)—over whether or not “the personal” is a productive or ethical component of Composition pedagogy. This chapter is a defense of personal writing assignments, in fact, but also a way to take seriously the important criticisms that have been leveled by poststructural critique against the reification of white, male, phallogocentric forms of discourse. Such a critique has been inflected differently by different scholars—compare the Althusserian rhetoric of Joel Foreman and David Shumway (chapter one) to the pragmatic, psychoanalytic rhetoric of Dominick LaCapra (chapter four), for example—to the point that “poststructuralism” is an extremely unreliable term, itself requiring more definitional work than I have space for here. To provide some necessary limits to my argument, then, I will rely on a single concept, “voice,” to identify and corral a range of disagreements that are relevant to the issue of personal writing. Once the discussion has been framed in this way, we will be able to see more clearly how photography complicates and broadens, but also strengthens, the role of personal writing in Composition.

**Voice, Vision, and the Humility of Style**

If a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing, as Kenneth Burke and others have speculated, then a kind of blindness accompanies even the best critical analyses. Looking closely seems to require keeping one eye shut. This is a feature of discourse-making in
Composition theory, no less than in any other discursive field. To state the evident, we are blindest toward perspectives that do not fit with our views. "The uncritical distortions that strike me most are usually committed by my enemies," Wayne Booth writes ("Pluralism and its Rivals" 786). The history of debate over using personal experience in Composition attests to this. This debate, which once ranged over a wider field of discourse (consider Harold Brent’s response to Brent Harold in College English in 1972, or Gerald Graff’s to John Rouse in the same publication in 1980, both "unconventional" by today’s standards), seems to have crystallized into sets of mutually exclusive opposites, such as Personal/Academic, Expressivist/Social Constructivist, Aesthetics/Politics. (Brent Harold called for a Marxist pedagogy of expressive writing—who today can see his logic?) From a poststructural perspective, we can say this ordering of discourse into binary oppositions tends to privilege one term over the other, for political ends. Consequently, our field’s argumentative history has contained quite a bit of “normal science” but not nearly as much innovation (let alone a “paradigm shift”), since these restrictive dualisms tend to channel discourse into well-worn grooves.

Poststructuralism teaches us that these binaries, which are the basis for political power and hegemony, are anything but God-given, stable, or unassailable. With the right kind of rhetorical pressure we can pry open the fissure between the two terms in each pair, ignite their difference, disrupt the political power they hold in place, and make room for new knowledge.

We can use the supposedly dead concept of voice as a crowbar with which to pry open the issue of the personal. The concept of voice, though it has its roots in narrative theory and nineteenth-century literature, first became prominent in Composition through
those teachers Darsie Bowden refers to as the “voicists” (59), such as Ken Macrorie and Walker Gibson. I will focus on these two teachers, since their different approaches to the concept of voice sketch out how the use of voice can situate a self in writing—but also because they have been frequent straw men for the typical poststructuralist critique of expressivism. In looking closely at their pedagogical views, I will argue, we have the raw material for an “expressive” pedagogy that contributes to rather than falls victim to the prevailing critique of subjectivity.

In “The Voice of the Writer,” written in 1962, Walker Gibson situates voice as a fairly straightforward rhetorical tool. Compositionists generally use the term, he writes, to help a student “into an area of experience … in which he is making linguistic distinctions he wasn’t making before.” For example, if in the middle of an argumentative essay a student suddenly modifies her syntax and downshifts from a formal to a colloquial tone of voice, the teacher can bring this to the student’s attention and thus encourage a linguistic “self-consciousness” in her, since “the self becomes defined by the language that the student is using”; “and this,” Gibson writes, “is the only self we are interested in” (11). The teacher’s job is not necessarily to discourage shifts in tone, but to point them out to the student so that she can learn to determine whether or not they are rhetorically effective. Gibson’s pragmatic interest is in “the limit imposed on the writer by his choice of voice, the particular man, image, personality, or artificial tone that he chooses to present himself with” (12).

For Gibson, voice is a rhetorical act (an “artificial tone”) that allows a writer to stage a particular narrative persona. This persona or ethos is an illusion, a sophisticated “performance” of style, as Tom Newkirk put it (1997), which is required of writers who
wish to engage the complexity of experience without having to pretend to “know it all.” Gibson defines the stylist as a writer “who is aware of the limits of his knowledge” and who holds onto “a sense of this irrevocable difficulty about words and things, the impossibility … of expressing experience as experience really is.” Most importantly for Gibson, then, attending to the rhetorical possibilities of one’s written voice helps make humility the cornerstone of style. In this quote from Richard Oppenheimer, Gibson communicates that the motif of humility-as-style is relevant to all fields of inquiry, from politics to science to “the most trivial of personal affairs”:

It is style which, in the domain of foreign policy, enables us to find a harmony between the pursuit of ends essential to us and the regard to the views, the sensibilities, the aspirations of those to whom the problem may appear in another light. It is style which is the deference that action pays to uncertainty. (13)

Walker Gibson has been roundly criticized for being an expressivist (Faigley, “Material Literacy and Visual Design”; Bowden; George, “From Analysis to Design”). Yet here we see him decentering a unified subjectivity in writing, grappling with the role of language in constructing a self, distinguishing between kinds of selves that may be called into being by different (political, scientific, personal) discourses. Insomuch as Gibson’s style is a “deference,” a reverential gesture, it is also a rhetorical pause or hyphen: a generative narrative silence which both acknowledges and gains sustenance from the irreconcilable gap between experience, language, and meaning.

Walker Gibson was not the only pioneering “voicist” who positioned prose style as more than a merely personal effect. In Telling Writing, Ken Macrorie famously borrowed from a student text the neologism “Engfish” to describe “the phony, pretentious language of the schools,” what Henry Thoreau called “torpid words, wooden or lifeless
words" (Macrorie 1), and what has also been called "academese." "Man's maturity,"
Macrorie communicates through Nietzsche, is "to have regained the seriousness that he
had as a child at play" (3). In "From Anonymous, Evasive Prose to Writing with
Passion," Scott Russell Sanders echoes this obligation to a natural language. As "a
schoolboy," Sanders writes, "I loved language with the juice still in it and the bark still on
it, language that conveyed the rhythm and reach of an individual voice," but a life in the
school system and the process of writing a dissertation made him "adept at the passive
voice, that essential tool of bureaucrats, corporate pirates, and flimflam artists" (B4). It
was only after he was far enough along in the tenure process that he was able to return to
his childhood passion for concrete prose: "I drew shamelessly on my own life. I swore off
jargon and muddle and murk. I wrote in the active voice, and as nearly as I could in my
own voice, the one I used in speaking about matters close to my heart" (B5). This use of
voice reveals a faith in the capacity of language to refer directly to experience (not to
mention the "heart"). It is also an explicitly political act of resistance against the highly
specialized, dehumanizing language of bureaucracy and corporatized efficiency.

We see from this the extent to which Macrorie's use of voice is linked to
American transcendentalism and a romantic conception of the creative individual. He
quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson: "But wise men pierce this rotten diction and fasten words
again to visible things" (2). There exists, in other words, a natural world of visible things
to which language can fasten, which is a metaphysical concept much critical theory
attacks at its foundations. Jacques Derrida's celebrated critique of the "metaphysics of
presence," for example, positions "voice" as a foundational problem in Western thought:

In every case [in the history of the West], voice is closest to the signified....
All signifiers, and first and foremost the written signifier, are derivative with
regard to what would wed the voice indissolubly to the mind or to the thought of the signified sense.... The written signifier is always technical and representative. (11)

In Derridean thought, "phonocentrism" is the bias toward "the voice and to breath," which is "very close to the interior holy voice" that derives true knowledge from the Word of God, and that situates the human voice in a close proximal relation to the divine (17). Writing, on the other hand, is the lesser term in the speech/writing dichotomy, historically understood as merely "technical," a human invention that can only mediate the Word of God; it is a second degree "fall into exteriority of meaning" (13), a use of language that has been "exiled in the exteriority of the body" (17). Writing's meaning is mediated, in that it is exterior to logos or "presence," whereas speech gives the illusion of being "closest to the self," an illusion that has, since Plato, valorized speech and disparaged writing (20). From this view of speech as "inside" (in a close proximity to truth) and writing as "outside" (a "mediation of a mediation" of truth) we can see that Macrorie's use of voice takes a phonocentric stance: "Before you write your next paper, sit still a moment and listen to yourself speaking inside. If you hear a voice that takes on a clear tone, ... listen as you write and get it on paper" (151)—that is, take the inner truth and write it out.

Darsie Bowden contends that under the weight of this Derridean attack on authorial presence, the metaphor of voice "ceases to function effectively" (61) and can only "fail at being unitary, coherent, and consistent because within one's voice are always the refractions of the voices of others, themselves heteroglossic" (72). I don't mean to set Bowden up as a straw figure here; she sustains an illuminating discussion of voice and adroitly proposes that "all metaphors foreclose on other ways of perceiving..."
experience" (61). But I think she gives too little attention to the ways a pedagogy of voice contains within itself the seeds for a complicated understanding of subjectivity. I don’t plan to defend an apolitical, solipsistic program of hegemonic indoctrination, as some critics have defined expressivism. Then again, I don’t think this is what expressivism has been, even when it has relied on voice to explain the production of meaning in writing.

As noted by Walker Gibson, “voice” has the pragmatic effect of helping inexperienced writers incorporate humility into their sense of style, which I read as helping them grasp the fictive nature of all representation. Rather than allow students to be paralyzed by the de-centered and dispersed nature of language, Gibson asks them to work with what they have, which is not a single voice but an awareness of the distance between experience and language. Meaning, for Gibson, rises up out of this lack of a connection. Indeed, speaking of this lack or loss becomes for him a powerful pedagogical tool, one he will build on throughout his writings on voice and in his textbooks dealing with visual culture ( and ).

It would seem Macrorie’s use of voice is much harder to bring into line with a poststructural awareness of the linguistic predicament. But I think it would be unwise to summarily dismiss what he offers writing teachers. Phonocentric bias notwithstanding, what does his pedagogy teach? As noted above, Macrorie’s use of Thoreau and Emerson reveals a link with Romanticism’s embrace of individual tuition over doctrinal thinking, its love of nature as the mirror of man, and even its aspirations for a new voice to “sing America.” If there is any doubt about this link, consider the following passage from Emerson’s famous “American Scholar” speech:

[The American Scholar should see] that nature is the opposite of the soul, answering to it part for part. One is seal, and one is print. Its beauty is the
beauty of his own mind. Its laws are the laws of his own mind. Nature then becomes to him the measure of his attainments. So much of nature as he is ignorant of, so much of his own mind does he not yet possess. And, in fine, the ancient precept, "Know thyself," and the modern precept, "Study nature," become at last one maxim. (Oration delivered to the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Cambridge, MA, August 31, 1837)

Vision for Emerson is a complex epistemological and ontological operation: transcendental in its imagining of an American “nature,” and yet rooted in the earthy realities of day to day American life. Looking outside of the self into nature, we find the contours of our innermost self, Emerson tells us. Likewise, introspection reveals processes of nature (namely, intuition and creativity) that make self-representation an act that reveals the self to be something more than self, to be more than one’s own personality. I have not conveyed the complexity of Emerson’s thought or the romantic tradition, which at any rate is not uniform in its understanding of the creative mind, as M. H. Abrams tells us (The Mirror and the Lamp 1953). But I think Macrorie uses Emerson’s ideas to encourage a prose style that is “close to the bone,” that brings the flesh of the world into writing. Important to note, however, he also suggests that in order to find “a true voice” (151), a writer must write “indirectly,” using strategies such as irony, burlesque, or sarcasm to interrupt the expectation of “a straight line [of narrative meaning] that runs right” to the reader (228).

I think this presents us with more than a mimetic relation of mind to nature. It also inserts a privative relation (“privative” denoting the absence of something that was supposed to be present) between the “eye” and the “I” of autobiography. The Socratic “know thyself,” the command to look inward, is counterbalanced by the command to study nature, to look outward—which requires a certain degree of “losing sight” of one’s self, of relinquishing the self temporarily. “It is as hard to see one's self as to look
backwards without turning around,” Thoreau wrote. Close observation, even (or especially) when the observed object is the experiential self, requires that one eye stay shut. That is, the observing eye must see inside and outside simultaneously; must see “visible things” but also beyond the visible; must see the self when writing autobiography, for example, but also beyond the self (to observe its relation to nature).

It is this double vision that is ignored in so many poststructural critiques of expressivist pedagogy and the concept of voice. Bowden’s argument looks at one aspect in the history of expressivist rhetoric and its romantic legacy—the desire for authorial presence in the written text—but it doesn’t see that voice also serves as an encounter with absence. Used in this way, absence is a theoretical term borrowed from poststructural discourse, but it resonates with Gibson’s notion of humility-as-style, and with Macrorie’s sense of nature as the “visible thing” that is lost and that language tries to recover. It is this double vision, moreover, that makes “life writing” and “light writing,” as Timothy Dow Adams calls autobiography and photography, two modes of representation for which the concept of authorial presence takes on new life. In the following section, I will connect the themes raised so far with photography and autobiography, in order to argue that the case against the personal essay—that it is a politically inert genre reliant on a suspect illusion of authorial presence—needs to be reopened, since photography today is such an omnipresent feature of our students’ public and private lives.

**The Double Vision of Photography and Autobiography**

Since the 1970s, there has been a sustained debate over the scope, definition, and referential status of autobiography. Poststructuralism in particular has led scholars to
proclaim the demise of autobiography as a literary form, as Michael Sprinker does in “Fictions of the Self: The End of Autobiography.” This attempt to undermine the authority of autobiography is grounded in a more fundamental critique of the self, which itself has three sources: (1) perhaps most notably, Jacques Lacan’s contention that subjective consciousness exists not in isolation, but only in a specular (mirroring) relation with the Other (4); (2) Roland Barthes’ thesis in “The Death of the Author” that an author’s identity is “a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture” (146); and Foucault’s thesis that the familiar concept of an “author” is a relatively recent invention; in actuality the “author” is not a single, identifiable subject at all, but rather a “function” of a complex web of discursive practices (“What is an Author” 1969).

Probably the most rigorous critique of the autobiographical self, however, is the one offered by Paul de Man. In “Autobiography as De-facement,” de Man demonstrates that defining autobiography by its generic status or by a “pact” between the writer and the reader proves problematic (see Lejeune), and distinguishing it from fiction even becomes an impossibility, since all language is figural, making autobiography “not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of the understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts” (921). An autobiographical narrative thus does not refer to the author herself but rather to “the illusion of reference,” to a literary figure (the narrator) that is not “clearly and simply a referent at all but something more akin to a fiction” (920). In life writing, de Man would say, the text does not refer to the author, but rather to the violent action of language on his or her experience—that is, to the “figuration” of him- or herself through the rhetorical figure of prosopopoeia (926). The narrative voice, in other words, marks not the actual author but the author’s absenting him- or herself through language. This
argument deconstructs the special referential power of autobiography, but its more far-reaching implication is the erasure of the writing subject’s body. This brand of poststructuralism finds, beneath an autobiographical style, not the tone and timbre of an actual writer’s voice, but a corpse.

Yet, in spite of the cadaverous sense of loss that shadows the autobiographical subject, in spite of the rigorous poststructural critique of authorial presence, the photographic image retains, in Andre Bazin’s phrase, the “irrational power ... to bear away our faith” (241). We can find this naïve embrace of photography, ironically, in the very scholars who most ardently proclaim the death of the author. Such poststructuralists as de Man and Barthes, despite their skepticism about the power of language, “become remarkably gullible when it comes to photographs” (Rugg 11). When de Man asks, “Are we so certain that autobiography depends on reference, as a photograph depends on its subject?” he explicitly attacks a naïve belief in autobiographical referentiality, but simultaneously accepts that a photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. To see somebody in a photograph, de Man implies, makes him or her present in a way that is impossible in writing. “One is seal, and one is print,” Emerson might add. Likewise, Barthes insists that photography’s punctum seems to verify the naïve belief that a photograph can “touch” the world: “From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here” (80). Though it has been well established in scholarship (and perhaps in common understanding) that photographs are culturally constructed, prone to manipulation and falsification, (Snyder and Allen; Berger; Walton; Trachtenberg, Reading American Photographs), the medium retains nonetheless a force of persuasion that borders on the magical. In fact, completely verbal
autobiography derives power from the camera’s irrational, magical illusion of referentiality.

Consider *Camera Lucida*, where Barthes’ “turn toward referentiality” becomes a kind of “deathbed conversion” that serves as an affirmation of “life and being in the face of death and the body’s dissolution” (Rugg 14). In this text, Barthes finds the visual equivalent of what writing teachers have called “authentic voice.” He contends that the portrait photographer must snap the shutter at just the right moment in order to capture the essence, the “soul” (109), the “luminous shadow which accompanies the body” of the photographed subject. If this essential quality is missed—if the photographer cannot capture the small but poignant details which bring the subject to life—then the resulting image contains “no more than a sterile body” (110). Ken Macrorie could not have said it better. What must be captured are those “visible things” that comprise the full, textural space of the world—all the details that fill the visual world’s “analogical plenitude,” all the fleeting and usually unnoticed things that comprise the “optical unconscious.” It isn’t a leap of logic to hear in this language the romantic compulsion to voice.

Barthes also offers us a model for reading personal narrative, a way not entirely inconsistent with the sense of language found in Gibson and Macrorie. Reading his text and gazing at its images, we begin to encounter Barthes himself, but only on the sly, tangentially. (In my edition, the sole photo of the author is a clear, well-lit head shot on the back cover—but he looks down and away from the lens, is reserved, maintains an expression of quiet attention, as if reading a text somewhere beyond the frame—Barthes’ “luminous shadow” speaks to me from this photograph). He teaches us throughout how to read his text (how to find him). For example, he contends that the difference between a
pornographic and an erotic photograph is that the former tries to reveal everything, whereas the latter conceals that which is most intimate (interiority); the erotic photograph "takes the spectator outside its frame, and it is there that I animate this photograph and it animates me" (59). By framing the photographic subject tenuously, tentatively—with humility, aware of the limitations of representation; that is, with a sense of style—and asking the viewer to imagine a "beyond" while gazing directly at the image, Barthes offers a model for looking at photographs that is also a way to read life narratives. In this erotics of photographic interpretation, the image operates by revealing but also by veiling the subject. Indeed, the first image of Barthes' text is of an empty bed: vacated just a moment ago, shrouded in dark curtains, but permeated by a soft, crepuscular light that seeps in through a small opening (an aperture) in the curtains, the bed seems to invite a body. (Who is presently absent from this erotic space? The viewer.) Personal narrative, with its processes of figuration and its reference to a "beyond," operates within a parallel economy of revelation and concealment. As Adams writes, "Autobiography's most salient feature" is its "attempt at reconciling authors' sense of self with their lives through an art that simultaneously reveals and conceals," and this, he observes, "is at the heart of the photographic act as well" (*Light Writing & Life Writing* 21).

What should be apparent at this point is that the poststructuralist critique of authorial presence in Composition, as manifested by the frequent dismissal of voice and disdain for expressive rhetoric, tends toward two significant blindnesses. On the one hand, it hastily dismisses expressive rhetoric for putting forward a narrow conception of subjectivity; on the other, it presumes that poststructuralism is immune to the irrational desire for "pure" reference. Neither of these claims accounts for the turns of thought
addressed in this chapter. Teachers such as Gibson and Macrorie draw on a rich
intellectual tradition that not only acknowledges but also embraces the ambiguity and
uncertainty entailed with presenting a self in writing. And some of the most prominent
poststructural theorists of the last few decades have been shown to make room for,
through the figure of the photograph, at least a partial, temporary but recurring
(“haunted”) authorial presence. Darsie Bowden’s argument relies on a Derridean critique
of presence, but Bowden does not acknowledge that even Derrida admits moments of
“gullibility.” (Note for example his observation that the “most cultivated, the most
reasonable, the most nonbelieving people easily reconcile a certain spiritualism with
reason,” 88-89.) All of this asks us to acknowledge not only that the expressivists indeed
have a relation to contingent subjectivity and linguistic lack, as noted above, but that
poststructuralists tend to have more of a bond to presence than is often admitted.

**Photography Visible, Obscured, and Invisible**

Last year I printed a commemorative series of portraits of a poet friend …
who died 11 years ago. In each of my images he was large and vigorous; in
one or two I could literally hear his voice.

—Elsa Dorfman, portrait photographer

We don’t require a highly specialized discourse to see that photography has deep
connections to personal experience and life writing. Most academics, at least, have likely
been haunted by particular photographs, have sensed their narrative intensity, even if they
have not written about them. Through years of exposure to texts with photos, we also
have a good hunch how photographs can mix with words. I am speaking of the nuts and
bolts of a photo essay: choosing images which meet our narrative goals, actually putting
photographs on paper, and determining how each page will look in the completed draft.

The rest of this chapter presents three strategies for combining words and images (all based on Sample Assignment #3). These practices are all informed by the specific properties of actual photographs (even absent ones), and they all ask students to conceive of narrative voice as a visual as well as a textual phenomenon.

Sample Assignment #3

Picture Perfect: Photography and the (Perfect?) Family Narrative

[Teacher's note: Early on, I ask students to collect old family photographs. The oldest pictures are the most intriguing, I tell them, and I encourage them to search out photos from the time before they were born. Not all students have access to childhood or family images. If they don't, I direct them to write the kind of essay discussed at the end of this chapter.]

Write an essay that incorporates the family photographs you've been collecting.

First, choose 3 of the best images and write about each of them in your class journal.

(1) What about the structure of the image makes it stand out? Describe the physical details of the image without interpreting what they might mean: that is, be as objective as possible. Is the image in color or black-and-white? How many subjects are in the photo, and how can you objectively describe their manner of dress, posture, bodily and facial expressions? Is a certain detail you’re intrigued by near the left or right, the top or bottom, or in the foreground or background of the image? Try to attend to every detail you can in this image.

(2) What about the social context of the image makes it important? Provide any contextual information you know or have gained from this image: that is, give us its subjective backdrop. If the scene is unremarkable, explain what the viewer should be seeing when they look at this image.

(3) After describing these photographs objectively and subjectively, write about your family. What other stories do these images bring to mind? How have the people and places we see there changed, and why have they changed?

(4) Finally, write about how this process of finding, ordering, and looking at these images has affected the narrator.

Second, determine how the words and images will be visually placed on the page. Experiment with different spatial configurations. How do they look at the head of the essay, at the end, or evenly dispersed throughout? Will you caption them? (If so, will your captions be clips from the essay itself or will they be new text?) Or, will they be mentioned in the body of the essay? You can also include the images without referring to them directly. (This will require you to find photographs that illuminate your family narrative well.) If you choose not to refer to the images, how will you place them in such a way that they make narrative sense? How might your narrative address these images, without having to explain them?

Figure 3. Sample Assignment #3
WYSIWYG, or Photography Visible: What You See Is What You Get

The most common style of photo essay, and the first I introduce to students, is that found in magazines like *Newsweek*, *Rosampling Stone*, and *Time*—captioned or directly referenced by the text, linked by a "straight line" of meaning. (In geek vernacular, the acronym WYSIWIG denotes pure mimesis: what you see on your computer screen is exactly what will come out of the printer.) In terms of practicality, this first assignment allows us to begin talking about visual design skills that are applicable to any visual-verbal text. We attend to borders and framing, the structure of specific photographs (e.g., lighting, composition, angle of view, color vs. black-and-white), how to manage spacing on each page, font style, cropping and/or enlarging of images, as well as the order in which they will be presented throughout the text.

Also, this assignment helps us problematize the idea of a direct channel of meaning between the subject of the photograph and the subject in writing. It helps students see the photos, captions, and stories of a photo essay as fictions created by a canny authorial eye and careful editorial work. In fact, this stylistic approach to the photo essay reveals how deceptive, how "hollow and lifeless," how mute the "wrong" personal photograph can be. (I once heard one student ask another, while looking at an image of herself, "Do I look this boring in real life?"") Whereas students begin with the hope that a certain image will speak their inner truth, this assignment often requires that they revise their expectations and approach the process again with some strategic humility. Finding the "luminous shadow" of the subject in both writing and photography requires a nuanced narrative voice.
Unsurprisingly, first drafts of such a project are rarely successful, if the measure of success is capturing the “essence” of a narrative subject. Though it can be a powerful learning experience to realize that magazine photographs are carefully managed and manipulated, students are occasionally disappointed with the images they bring in and with how they actually look on the page. This is to be expected for writers who are not accustomed to having to craft or perform a visual or written self. What’s more, students may not have interesting (or any) photographs of themselves or family members. Asking them to produce their own pictures may or may not be an option. The photographs they do have may be completely lackluster—the supply of virtually indistinguishable high school graduation snapshots is seemingly endless. But if students approach the creative task with a sense of humility, even the most dull, uninformative, emotionally blank images can be made meaningful in an unexpected way, can be put to narrative work, and can generate a strong sense of voice.

As a case in point, I recently worked with a student (“Carl”) who, though always excited to contribute to class conversations about writing, politics, and visual culture, was an uninventive writer and had produced a dry, formulaic first essay. In response to the “Picture Perfect” prompt, he had brought in a single photograph of himself, centered against a dark background, his right arm around his mother, his sister to her right. He is wearing a red cap and gown. To his left, further away and behind, stands his father. All four look directly into the camera, and by their closeness, relaxed postures and the warmth in their smiles, we can guess they are related. This first draft was based off an informal snapshot titled “Graduation,” and essentially consisted of a two page description
of the meal Carl and his family enjoyed on the day he received his diploma. Sticking closely to the “WYSIWYG” approach, he also named each family member in his photo.

Carl would eventually produce a powerful photo essay out of this incredibly mediocre first draft, but before I describe it I want to note the ways this assignment asks students to conceptualize photography as an aspect of their narrative voice. The link between visuality and vocality is an old topic, and practicing photographers know it well. “There comes a point in your photographic journey,” writes photojournalist Stanley Leary, “where you begin to find your own voice.” Others, like portraitist Elsa Dorfman in the quote above, hear a voice “literally” rising up from the image. “Voice” thus aims to describe an aspect of visual experience that can’t be gotten at with a purely visual vocabulary.

This is perhaps due to the phenomenological difference between hearing and seeing: whereas vision seems to penetrate and isolate, sound radiates and encompasses. In Walter Ong’s words, the “visual ideal is clarity and distinctness, a taking apart,” whereas the “auditory ideal ... is harmony, a putting together” (Orality and Literacy 72). The “highest charm” of great works of art, Emerson writes, “is the Universal language they speak” (230). Such charm is more than “skill in surfaces, in outlines, or rules of art,” but rather is “a radiation from the work of art of human character” (229). Beauty or “charm,” as Emerson defines it, is more than the sum of its parts—what is charming about visual art is that it shows us more than what we can see (for Emerson, this surplus is “character”; for Barthes, it is “essential being”). What is beautiful or sublime about art, in this view, is that it addresses what is absent from the scene of representation.
Photographs can have a voice, then, insofar as they speak to us of their own absence-as-presence.

I forget who gave us this great phrase: “I can’t define voice, but I know it when I see it.” Seeing and hearing have always collaborated and wrestled on the page, and not just in the narrower sense of ekphrasis, as “giving voice to a mute art object” (Mitchell 152). In the photo essay, voice also animates photographs. “Voice” is a chiasmus, a rhetorical figure lodged firmly between sound and vision. It helps us grasp the mysterious energy between words and photographs, without resolving the constant movement of one mode toward the other. Walker Gibson confirms this when he says that “seeing is at the very center of the writer’s situation,” but that the writer’s vision is more than what is contained within a single image (46). If a writer’s style is comprised of pauses and gaps just as much as from what is actually said (what Gibson calls “humility”), than photographs, in their pronounced silences, can strengthen one’s voice.

With the voices of these other writers and artists in mind, I return to the classroom. I think Carl’s revision process powerfully epitomizes how photographs engage with and enlarge a writer’s voice. Before he revised “Graduation,” the class read the first half of Paul Auster’s The Invention of Solitude. One of the images Auster weaves into this autobiography is a faded, seemingly straightforward portrait of his father’s childhood family (4). It is the first image the reader encounters in the text, apparently nothing more than a sepia representation of a bucolic nineteenth-century family. After closely describing the background and placement of characters—itself a virtuoso performance and lesson in close reading—Auster gives an eloquent interpretation that is also an act of discovery. He realizes, to his horror and ours, that his “grandfather had
been cut out of it” by Auster’s grandmother, who had in fact murdered the grandfather (35). Auster turns the photograph into a narrative device that works by interrupting the narrative—it becomes a pause, a hyphen. Rather than establishing a straight line of meaning to the reader, Auster lets the image divert our gaze, as well as our sense of how photography reifies an understanding of “family.” Inevitably, the reader returns to the front of the book to examine the image again, and is haunted by it. Auster’s voice, artfully woven between word and image, is a rich, multilayered performance of de-centered subjectivity, but a masterful self-performance, nonetheless.

After reading and discussing the Auster text, Carl decided to keep his graduation snapshot but changed the essay’s title to “Ghost,” focusing it on his own father and giving it a sense of purpose the first draft lacked. The essay keeps quite a bit of the gastronomic lavishness (“That was a great meal,” Carl told me when I pointed this out), but now includes two paragraphs closely analyzing the snapshot, in which he observes that his father “is miles away from his family, yet he can be seen clearly through this photograph.” The laughter and closeness of the rest of the family now casts into relief his father’s severe shyness, a “ghost” who “is present and floats aimlessly from place to place,” who appears in photographs “in the background, walking by himself,” or is “partially photographed, [so the viewer can only see] his shoulder or leg” (4). After reading this, the original photograph becomes animated, resisting the dismissive vision usually reserved for such images. Carl also cropped a close-up of his father’s kindly face and reprinted it at the top of the essay’s final page, drawing our gaze further into the original photograph. In this way, “Ghost” dramatically stages the absenting of the narrative subject, Carl’s father, but also keeps him in our gaze, and in a brilliant final
turn, asks us to return his. In presenting the reader with a photograph of a subject who by his nature shrinks away from the camera's probing eye, Carl allows this otherwise ordinary, uneventful snapshot to give voice to a man who would otherwise remain silent and invisible.


Another combining strategy is found in Lawrence Sutin's *A Postcard Memoir*, an autobiography divided into ninety-seven vignettes or "themes," each of which has reprinted above or alongside it an old black-and-white picture postcard. Though the book was written in the 1990s, apparently none of its postcard photographs are more recent than the 1930s or 40s (most are much older), and all are found art. This is a good text for short in-class readings. More importantly, it demonstrates that, unlike the more traditional mix of word and image described above, the autobiographical photograph doesn't have to derive from the same time or geographic space as the written narrative, or even from the actual life of the writer. (What the reader sees is *not* what he gets, as I aim to demonstrate in a moment.) This fictional image produces an effect of dislocation, of strangeness, but also of humor in the personal narrative. As an example of the humor photography offers in relation to personal narratives, in one vignette about being a boy and admiring (wrongly, it appears) his father's "freedom" as an adult, Sutin uses a postcard of what we assume are the members of a family—father, mother, daughter, and son—walking past a fish ladder. The father stares off into the distance as a single salmon goes airborne in the foreground. The postcards work metaphorically for the writing, but because they are images of real people who had likely passed away before the book was even published,
the metaphor is made strange, and this strangeness is imparted to Sutin’s written narrative. The ghostly quality, the strangeness, with which the image unexpectedly makes the text speak, becomes a part of Sutin’s “luminous shadow.”

This raises a good question for class discussion: “Does including fictional images in an autobiography make it less true, or at least less autobiographical?” This in turn leads us to question the troublesome distinction between truth and fiction, the value of personal experience in establishing a claim in writing, how photography can mediate our understanding of experience and the self, and whether or not we can ever call a photograph “fictional” (as opposed to falsified by actual manipulation). Sutin maintains that these images actually add to his personal narrative, insisting that “certain memories of mine began to seep into certain postcards,” while other postcards “were egging me on through the stations of my life” (3). The images, fictional but absolutely realistic, drew the writer into an authentic engagement with autobiography. I think students quickly grasp this game, and enjoy searching for photographs—comical, mysterious, obscure—that they believe can help them portray qualities of their historical being that up to then might never have been thought.

After reading Sutin, many students opt for this strategy. They are still required to make the images speak to the writing, that is, to make them purposeful for the narrative. But if things have gone well in the semester, they’ve learned better how to do this with subtlety and reservation—what Gibson calls style—using photography for rhetorical as well as illustrative purposes.

My favorite example of this strategy deploys a single gray, foggy image, about one inch wide and two inches high, which is not mentioned anywhere else in the
student’s (“Kat’s”) essay, though it is framed at the top of the first page. True, it is an image of Kat as a little girl, but it is left uncaptioned, unreferenced—it could be any little girl. The title of the essay, in bold and printed directly above the photo, is “Of My Asymmetrical Composition and the Sudden Conception of an Unexpected Cysta.” The essay describes Kat’s experience with inexplicably gaining weight at fifteen, being told by her doctor she was pregnant, then discovering that, in actuality, she carried in her stomach a twenty-pound teratoma, containing “one healthy liver, much hair, many teeth,” and whom Kat named, with great affection, “Little Suzy” (5).

This complicity of self with Other uncannily mirrors photography’s role in autobiography. On the one hand, the photograph, because of its placement directly beneath Kat’s remarkable title, does not portray Kat but rather Little Suzy, who gazes at the reader as a monstrous Other. This is the rhetorical work of prosopopoeia, de Man tells us, in which a figure in the text speaks as if from beyond the grave. On the other hand, as uncanny as the image becomes, the little figure is still and always Kat, whose actual body survived and bears the scar of the surgery. Through this photograph, in other words, the writer’s self survives the cut of autobiography. Rugg observes that this is akin to a cinematic “trick.” The cinema’s moving images are in fact mute, but the separate technology of sound recording is sequenced in such a way as to veil this silence. Used simultaneously, the two technologies give the illusion of an embodied voice, of “real life” in two dimensions. In a similar manner, photography in this personal essay links Kat’s “voice” with her “body,” allowing us to see “that the inclusion of photographs envisions a revitalization of the corpse of the author, a re-membering of the autobiographical self”
Such an essay not only has an “authentic voice,” in other words, but this voice rises up from a material body.

Photography Invisible: What You See Isn’t There

Another effective strategy for combining writing and photography is to represent the photographs in writing only, allowing their absence to become narrative force. A powerful example of this is a student essay aptly titled “Silent Photographs.” The writer begins by revealing that she has not seen her father since she was four, and that when he left “he stole all the photographs of me,” which she finds inexplicable. She goes on to establish a sort of anti-photographic life-philosophy, simultaneously denying the validity of photographic truth and laying claim to it in order to narrate her personal history:

Photographs play tricks on our memories. I look at photographs from when I was younger and in all the photographs I am smiling. I am smiling because someone is telling me to smile or because photographs are taken of my family at happy times. By looking at photographs from my family, one would get the notion that there isn’t a sad day in the life of [our] family. I look at photos from eighth grade environmental camp. Each photo is a picture of my friends and I having fun. But I remember I hated eighth grade. I hated everything about eighth grade. There were too many cliques. There were too many arguments. There were too many rules. But pictures weren’t taken of me strolling down the corridor to classes or sitting in the principal’s office after getting in a fight on the bus. I don’t have pictures of all my friends fighting over what eighth grade girls fight about. But maybe one day I will look through this photo album when I can’t remember those details and think of how much I loved eighth grade, just look at that smile on my face. School days were so much fun. (2)

Overall, the essay suggests that she is not so much angry at her father as she is angry at the photographs taken of her after her father left—as if he were a bumbling but otherwise benign accomplice to the crime, and the photographs themselves the true source of betrayal. In fact, when she finally meets her father (a few months before writing this
essay), she sees that photography will betray him, too: "He will look at pictures of himself and I, the daughter he hasn’t seen for sixteen years, and he won’t know that I at the very least respect him.” What photographs actually betray, she reveals in her final sentence, is language itself: “They say that photographs speak a thousand words, but that does not replace the words that should have been spoken” (4).

Rather than situate this as an exploitation of personal loss, we can view it as this writer’s attempt to manage her losses using photography as a metaphor. In “stealing” the photographs of her as a child, her father strips her of a certain level of control in the telling of her life story. The theft begins with an act of violence—for sixteen years, her only memory of her father, from when she was a toddler, is his physical abuse of her mother—and this violence is a past event that continually threatens her present. However, by speaking of (but not revealing) the lost photographs, and by imaginatively mixing them with all the other photographs that have “narrated” her life for her, she attains a degree of control. Note that her powerful narrative voice is welded to the absent photographs. The writer acknowledges that language distorts her self-image, but by keeping her photographs “silent” and speaking on their behalf, this acknowledgment becomes an assertion of rhetorical power, a new voice with which to narrate her own history. Her childhood photographs become more referential than if they had actually been included in the essay. To have seen them, I think, would have weakened their rhetorical force. In Rugg’s words, writing in the absence of images from a damaged childhood—writing so that their absence is felt as a narrative presence—allows the life writer to “[reverse] the process of looking at photographs to create or gain access to memory,” and to instead “[use] her memory to gain access to photographs” (201). This
“magical” belief in the referential power of photography, in other words, provides depth
and persuasive force to this writer’s voice. I imagine that this is an idea Barthes,
Emerson, and Macrorie would all find agreeable.

What I have been aiming for here is a style of autobiography, using words and
images, that can reveal the connections between aesthetics and the ethical challenges of
being a writer. Poststructuralism has shown us these challenges most forcefully, but no
writer who has ever attempted to write autobiography needs critical theory to know that it
is a troubling genre. Authentic subjectivity is elusive, and taking too simple an approach
to it can obscure the larger rhetorical demands of the autobiographical text. This is what
makes “life writing” an ethically charged genre: to confront the limits of one’s authorial
self, but to keep writing in spite of those limitations, is to confront the ways that personal
history is always also a social history. Autobiography shows us the “other” that resides
within our own intimate sense of self.

The first two chapters of this dissertation have tried to show that aesthetics and
ethics are closely intertwined. Chapter III moves even further in this direction, looking at
how the research essay—a genre traditionally based on fact, objective observation, the
impartial presentation of an empirical eye—poses particular aesthetic and ethical
challenges. When combined with photography—once considered to be the height of
objective data—we find that the facts of the world cannot be viewed beyond the aesthetic
parameters of our modes of representation. By combining modes, however, we can
sometimes produce aesthetic affects that draw students more deeply into the rhetorical
act. Such multimodality is where photography, research writing, and surrealism meet.
CHAPTER III

SEEKING WITH A “WILD EYE”: PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE RESEARCH ESSAY

Photographs entice viewers by their silence, the mysterious beckoning of another world. It is as enigmas, opaque and inexplicable as the living world itself, that they most resemble the data upon which history is based.

—Alan Trachtenberg, Reading American Photographs (xvi-xvii).

Relying on "the modes of discourse," such as "Narration" or "Argument," to guide and categorize student writing, Bob Connors contended, is a sterile pedagogy that has little to do with the actual purposes writers have for composing, which explains why it fell from favor in the 1950s ("The Rise and Fall of the Modes of Discourse"). Yet when I ask students fresh from high school how to write a research paper, many of them consistently give me the "correct" answer. They know they are to mention what the paper's going to be about in the first paragraph ("intro"), write about that in the next three ("body") paragraphs, then remind the reader about those three points in the final paragraph ("conclusion"). All that is trite and uninspiring about modal thinking seems to have been resuscitated in the form of the "five-paragraph" essay. While not a mode per se, the five-paragraph essay is a pseudo-rhetorical form to which many new college students cling. It is easy to mock how little this form actually advances us toward "new knowledge," and easy to laugh at ourselves for once having relied on it. Eventually, however, students will need to present
their research without it, which can cause great consternation in those who have relied on this cookie-cutter model as their primary means of presenting scholarly research.

Broadly speaking, it is no wonder students tend to see personal narratives as easy and research writing as hard—a phenomenon that cannot, I think, simply be explained away with the lament that students lack discipline. The first kind of writing deals with experiences and concepts that are supposedly interior and familiar to, at home in, the subjectivity of the writer, and so seem to encourage a kind of narrative play and openness. The latter kind deals with ideas that are supposedly external and foreign to the writer, and so seem to demand the rhetorical “control” promised by the five-paragraph form. (Students occasionally ask if they can include “personal opinion” in a research essay, which reveals how deeply research writing is split off in their imagination from personal narrative). In this binarized understanding, the five-paragraph model is a machine: Pour in information gleaned from one’s notes and flash cards, and out comes the voice of “scholarship,” cleansed of the writer’s lack of confidence and authority. Personal narrative, conversely, can make playful use of “opinion,” of ready-at-hand, subjective knowledge. This chapter takes an interdisciplinary approach to examine how a photographic pedagogy can challenge this reductive dichotomy, and to reexamine the purposes of and possibilities for research writing.

**Aesthetics, Politics, and Research with a Purpose**

In Composition, research writing has been deemed a problematic genre, at best. In the 1980s, James Ford and Dennis Perry found that over eighty percent of first-year Composition courses and forty percent of advanced Composition courses had a research
requirement (827), though there were greatly divergent views as to its value. Some department chairs saw the requirement as pointless, some thought it was helpful for students planning to attend graduate school, and some saw it as a chance for students “to develop discipline and a scholarly attitude” (830). While these results are dated, I see no reason to suspect that the percentages have gone down.

The fact that research writing is so widespread does not mean it is being practiced well. In *Writing in the Academic Disciplines*, David Russell noted that the research paper, modeled on the German scientific paper, was once an effective for of scholarly apprenticeship for American college students, but after the compartmentalization of academic disciplines in the late nineteenth century (7-8), the research paper, in becoming “ubiquitous, relatively uniform” (78), lost whatever force it once had. Such statistical and historical scholarship suggests that today, many students and writing teachers are made to wrestle with an assignment that Robert Davis and Mark Shadle call “disrespected and omnipresent, trite and vital, central to modern academic discourse, yet a part of our own duties as teachers of writing that we seldom discuss” (417).

Of course, many Compositionists do discuss it. Richard Larson maintains that while research is indeed an activity that is central to academic life across the disciplines, what often gets assigned at the end of the freshman Composition course bears little resemblance to the purposeful, context- and discipline-specific texts created at the more advanced levels of academia. For Larson, the “research paper” in first year Composition ends up being a “Non-form of writing,” a “generic, cross-disciplinary term” with “no conceptual or substantive identity” that merely turns writing programs into a “service” industry for other departments (813, 816). A similar distaste for the generic prescriptions
of the “research report” probably helped fuel Ken Macrorie’s “I-Search,” which asks students to write in first-person and to include extensive self-reflection in the presentation of their research. Macrorie’s approach, especially, is premised on the idea that when the topic of research is personally meaningful to the writer, the resulting text will exhibit a sense of purpose that is lacking in traditionally assigned research. This calls for an aesthetically sophisticated approach to teaching writing. In contrast, Diana George writes that the problem with research assignments, especially as they have been taught in textbooks, is they do not ask students to make meaning from, or think critically about, their source materials, often requiring “little more than a research report” (“Using the Research Paper to Teach Critical Thinking” 27). As opposed to Macrorie, who allows more freedom in the picking of a topic, she requires all students to research a single content area (30). Furthermore, she dismisses Macrorie’s inquiry-based research model, which she calls, “at best, a baby step” (29) toward critical thinking. George calls for “informed, clear, and developed … prose” that “[increases] awareness of the complexity of social reality” (31). This is a more critically oriented approach, in which the student writer’s aesthetic awareness is less important than the political awareness he can achieve through writing.

With Macrorie and George so polarized, it seems Composition is divided between aesthetical (interior, subjective, personal) and political (exterior, objective, social) ways of seeing the world. Of course, this is a bad faith description of what is actually a shifting and overdetermined state of affairs. Politics can be aestheticized, art can be politicized, and subjectivity articulates itself differently in each of these contexts. I don’t have the room in this chapter to re-articulate Composition’s many historical and theoretical
insights into aesthetics and politics, or to elaborate on the historical relationship between the two terms. I will point out, however, that scholarship on research writing inevitably attempts to put them into conversation, either explicitly or implicitly. My argument here accepts a priori that there is always a rapport between politics and aesthetics—between the discursive and material distribution of power in a society, and that society's sense of beauty, taste, and style. But how the two categories are linked determines other important details, especially when photography is involved. More to the point, in Composition, aesthetically based pedagogies tend to be more invested in personal writing, and politically based pedagogies place more emphasis on civic argumentation. Throughout the last decade or so, Compositionists have come up with innovative ways to challenge this seemingly natural bifurcation of the field—ways, as I will show, that have often relied heavily on photography.

For instance, in *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*, James Berlin criticizes the denigration of rhetoric in the history of Western thought, which he insists has resulted in a "poetic-rhetoric binary" in contemporary English departments (10). To overcome this split, he introduces film, television, literature, and critical reading into his classrooms (126-37), and students conduct multimedia research into these cultural texts, including producing their own videos (137). Berlin's pedagogy is clearly more on the political side of the binary, as his attention to aesthetics is largely restricted to producing critical readers, not designers, of cultural discourse. In "From Analysis to Design," Diana George, though also prioritizing politics over aesthetics, goes further in attending to the materials and material history of literacy, and actively has students get their hands and eyes, as well as their critical minds, involved in the research process. Taking into
consideration the material artifacts, practices, and histories that produce contemporary literacy (see Trimbur, "Review of Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures"; Faigley, "Material Literacy and Visual Design"), George attends to the "multiliteracies" (see Chapter I of this dissertation) that comprise human culture, and asks students to include these many ways of looking and knowing into their research projects. Overall, this group of scholars contend that alphabetic literacy does not adequately describe how literate meaning is created today, and furthermore that "alphabetic text [has always] had ‘multimedia’ ambitions," as Richard Lanham puts it (128). This group also largely downplays or ignores the affective processes (delight, shock, disgust, etc.) involved with different modes of representation, as I argue in chapter one.

Matthew Wilson also turns aesthetics toward political ends. He argues that Richard Larson’s “washing-his-hands-of-the-whole-mess” (241) approach to the research assignment (mentioned above) is not helpful for teachers who are required to assign a research paper. The research assignment, Wilson states, can actually cultivate in students a “delight in the unexpected and incongruous,” in the “uncanny” playfulness, which is indicative of the literary essay (248). In appealing to terms such as “delight” and “uncanny,” Wilson distances research writing from its roots in the science report, a genre which “denies uncertainty and ambiguity” (243) and positions writing as something that happens after the pertinent facts have been collected. Rather, the pertinent facts and their meaning emerge only within (not in spite of) the writing process. Wilson’s discourse is politically useful, he contends, because it is modeled after James Clifford’s postmodern ethnography, which deploys Surrealism in order to disrupt the too-easy cooptation of
ethnographic data by a bourgeois viewing public. Citing Clifford, Wilson argues that the student who is asked to write a research paper—in both positivistic and expressivistic pedagogies—is like a nineteenth-century British ethnographer, whose totalizing vision of the exotic Other hides "the research situation's ambiguities and diversities of meaning" (253). To counteract this totalizing vision, postmodern ethnography harnesses the art practices of the surrealists, fragmenting and defamiliarizing the researched data and thus forcing the viewer (and the student researcher) to recognize their complicity in the construction of that data. However, citing David Bartholomae, Wilson also asserts, rather matter-of-factly, that it is "wrong to teach late-adolescents that writing is an expression of individual thoughts and feelings," since such writing only allows a student to produce "reasonably competent sentimental narratives," not academically sophisticated discourse (251). Wilson's conjoining of aesthetics and politics, in other words, disallows personal narrative, and does not acknowledge expressivism's equal (but different) investment in ambiguity and uncertainty.

At any rate, a sense of "delight in the unexpected and incongruous" is a productive trait for the researcher, and it features prominently in pedagogies that make use of the visual. In "'Building a Mystery': Alternative Research Writing and the Academic Act of Seeking," Davis and Shadle also encourage "uncertainty, passionate exploration, and mystery" (418), but go further to embrace both scholarly research conventions and aesthetic strategies traditionally practiced by expressivist teachers. The authors distinguish four forms of research writing, to be taught in a sequence—first a research argument, then a personal research paper, then a research essay, and finally a multi-media research project—and, though there is probably more overlap between these
categories than the authors suggest (440), the distinctions show research writing to be a serious and intellectual but also expansive and playful act of writing. In the tradition of Tom Romano’s multi-genre essay, they encourage the use of visual artifacts in their student texts, as equal but different forms of communication (435), and make room for personal writing throughout the entire sequence.

In “Learning to Trust the Twelfth Picture on the Roll,” Bruce Ballenger puts these concepts into practice, paying particular attention to how photography serves as a metaphor for the “processes of searching and discovering” ( “Learning to Trust the Twelfth Picture,” 33). Circling a subject, photographing it in different kinds of light and from different perspectives, provides an “apprenticeship in writing with light,” Ballenger says—just as curiosity and an aesthetic openness of mind can help one discover something unexpected about one’s research topic (40). For example, a good nature photographer, like a good researcher, does not look for the picture that will simply show viewers what they have already seen in any number of landscape images; rather, she aims to defamiliarize the landscape, to make it alien, to present a view that is otherwise invisible to common, everyday vision. This linking of research to camera work suggests that good research creates texts “that shine with the language and methods of the essay,” since both the essay form and most genres of photography (natural and landscape; documentary; portraiture and self-portraiture) promote self-reflection. Even an autobiographical essay—like many kinds of photography—isn’t necessarily an exercise in solipsism, but in fact can become an important kind of intellectual work that much contemporary pedagogy rushes past: it makes curiosity a virtue and develops a passion for exploration. Photographing and writing personally about the research topic not only
produces artifacts for the final paper, but also strengthens the student writer’s sense of self as an academic researcher, for whom curiosity is a virtue and a passion (39).

The research pedagogies just reviewed militate against the sterile, limiting vision of the traditionally conceived “research report.” Each holds a unique conversation about aesthetics and politics, and each situates personal writing and affect differently. For George, the aesthetic power of the visual is only important insofar as it makes a political argument; personal writing is irrelevant to visual rhetoric, and affect is left unaddressed. For Wilson, affect is central to research (there is a delight in ambiguity) and is generated through the aesthetic strategies of ethnographic surrealism. Like George, he mandates a single topic of research for the class, and also like George, he eschews personal narrative. Teacher-researchers such as Ballenger, Davis, Romano, and Shadle make affect a central part of their pedagogies, weaving the sense of mystery and pleasure that comes from aesthetic work into the foundation of the research process. For example, they allow students to choose their own topics, which affirms that self-reflection leads to a more meaningful research process for the student, as well as a more interesting read for the teacher. Ballenger, especially, allows aesthetic experimentation to disrupt an easy, surface knowledge of the research topic. In this view, camera work provides a useful metaphor for the searching and discovering that writers do, in addition to producing actual materials for the research paper. Moreover, this pedagogy is also political, in that photography is a material practice that disrupts the traditional (and still powerful) notion of research writing as a transparent medium that innocently displays “facts” and “meaning.” I put those words in scare quotes not because facts and meaning don’t exist, but to point out that knowledge is constructed and that language is not transparent. The
material processes involved with composing any sort of photo essay make the constructedness of knowledge, we might say, perfectly clear.

**The Surreal Eye as the Researcher’s Tool**

It is important for students to look at photographs communally, in small and large group sessions. Doing so allows us to build an interpretive community with a shared vocabulary and set of viewing practices. For instance, we learn to distinguish between denotative and connotative modes of interpretation. I try to keep this distinction simple. The first mode of interpretation, I say, is giving an objective account of the material details of the image; the second is a way of using these details to interpret the image. We also define point-of-view or perspective, which Kress and van Leeuwen describe as historically constructed methods for forming a symbolic relation between the viewer and the subject of an image (135-57). Whether or not the subject of a photo is viewed from above, below, at eye-level and straight on, or from the side, will determine the range of relations the viewer is supposed to have with the subject of the image. A view from the ground up, for instance, tends to situate the subject of the photo as somehow superior to the viewer, whereas the bird’s eye perspective will tend to invert that relationship.

It is good to get students putting these terms into practice as soon as possible. Early in the course, I ask them to collect magazine and newspaper advertisements from as wide a variety of publications as possible. This is essentially a conventional ad-analysis assignment: (1) examine the images side by side; (2) identify ideological patterns that emerge; and (3) develop questions that help us understand what those patterns mean. Such questions might include: Are women portrayed differently than men? Which kinds
of magazines have more white/black/Hispanic/Asian models? Which visual perspectives are used most often in ads aimed at mothers/fathers/teenage boys/teenage girls? And so forth. Students are invited to consider the ways the concepts presented by these ads have influenced their personal lives, or they can undertake a simple compare-and-contrast (between, say, images of men and images of women in sports magazines). Either way, this semiotic work accomplishes two things: it demonstrates how constructed and manipulative the images that surround us can be, and it gives us some analytical tools that can be applied to the other work of the course.

We also look for ways that photographers have used the camera as a tool for research. For example, Eugene Atget, whose clean, direct views of Paris often reveal empty streets. (Go to http://www.gingkopress.com/_cata/imal/atget-i1.htm to see several of his images). Even though many of these photographs seem to capture a city that is momentarily paralyzed and eerily vacant, they pulse with anticipation, as if at any moment the scene will be flooded by a mob in violent protest. Examining many of these ghostly cityscapes, it is easy to see why Susan Sontag called photography “the only art that is natively surreal” (On Photography 51). These images seem to rip bits of the city out of a lived context, seem to make buildings and street corners part of an alien landscape. When the surrealists fawned over his accomplishment, Atget responded with annoyance, saying, “These are simply documents I make.” But the surrealists were right, these are not simply documents. They haunt us in a way facts in a scientific report do not. And yet they also teach us a straightforward lesson about the architectural landscape of nineteenth-century Paris.
We also look at American documentary photographers, which thickens our understanding of a good research project. For example, after reading the “Prologue” to Agee and Evans’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the class conversation turns to the ethical problem of documenting the suffering of others. Agee’s rage, his “paralyzing, self-lacerating anger,” Walker Evans called it, seeps through his tortured prose, and students feel it (ix). Some are inspired by his war on the hypocrisy of readers who will turn his report on “the cruel radiance of what is” (11) into “Art” (15). Others are infuriated by his mockery and derision. This is a good tension to have—it riles us up and gets us all to think about the tension between the book’s photographs and its words, and Agee exploits it:

> If I could do it, I’d do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement…. A piece of the body torn out by the roots might be more to the point. (13)

We know, as Agee must have, that he had indeed produced a work of art. He shows us here what kind of artwork it is: surrealistic. (The surrealistic photograph might be described as a “piece of the body torn out by the roots.”) To help make sense of Agee’s astonishing rage and the beauty of his text, the class reads excerpts from Robert Coles’ *Doing Documentary Work*, where Coles tells us that Agee’s sense of guilt at not having done *enough* stems from the fact that he must have left out quite a bit—he couldn’t include *everything*. The documentarian that confronts “the cruel radiance” of raw, everyday reality must carve into that reality as a storyteller, must treat the complex events there as characters in a story. It is a kind of fiction that for Agee did not do justice to those he studied, but that needed to be told. As Coles puts it:
We who cut, weave, edit, splice, crop, sequence, interpolate, interject, connect, pan, come up with our captions and comments, have our say (whenever and wherever and however) have thereby linked our lives to those we have attempted to document, creating a joint presentation for an audience that may or may not have been asked to consider all that has gone into what they are reading, hearing, or viewing. (100)

To understand the researched text as more than simply the tranquil representation of “facts,” then, Agee and Coles ask us to see their topics in the way Barthes sees the photograph: as a bit of reality “torn out by the roots.” Photography in its surrealist mode is right at home in such research.

Because photographs can do no more than rip moments out of their original time and context, they enact what James Clifford calls “ethnographic surrealism” (117-51). The reality that is presented by Renaissance humanism as a transparent vehicle for Truth, is broken into pieces by Modernity—the fragmenting of knowledge by our heavily mediated, sound-bite-oriented culture—that must then be found by the flâneur and re-assembled by the bricoleur. As surrealist art critic Carl Einstein wrote in 1929, “The uninterrupted fabric of this reality is torn,” and only a research method sensitive to this fragmentation can effectively bring the aesthetic and the political onto the same page together (quoted in Clifford 130). In asking students to conduct research with a photographic eye, we ask them to take on the role of the flâneur and bricoleur, the hedonistic observer and the junk collecting artist. All the aesthetic strategies of surrealism are needed to produce the photographic research essay: “strolling” around with a camera, finding unique juxtapositions, freewriting and jotting down one’s thoughts in a journal. And once the photographs have been taken and developed, the writer-designer uses collage, montage, doubling, mise en abîme, blurring, and incongruous methods of captioning images to create a “delight in the unexpected and incongruous,” a playfulness
that takes the difficulty of representation very seriously. (Sample Assignment #2 is an example of this kind of "wild eyed" seeking.)

Of course, the value of this approach needs to answer the ground zero question: Will this help students become better writers? To that I can only answer anecdotally, and say that asking students to produce photo essays encourages a kind of experimentation that I have not seen in non-visual writing assignments. Once they begin to take photographs, writers understand that the space of their inquiry is no longer confined to the space of the page. For example, a student who had been working at McDonald's since he was a freshman in high school, took pictures of two of his fellow employees, then stapled each photograph to a piece of paper that included a brief description of the subject's personality, as well as a note from the subject him- or herself. The notes from the subjects are in their own handwriting, and they respond to the question, "If you could have a job anywhere else in the world, where would it be?" He then placed the photo essays—part biography, part autobiography, part field notes—into food containers from the restaurant: the hefty young African American man with coke bottle glasses was rolled up into an oval French fry container; an older white woman who wanted to "work at home" was slid into an apple pie box. The writer "began" the essay on a store napkin:

I sit in the bathroom, it is 2:30 AM on a Friday night. The smoke from my cigarette pools around my head. I write this to you, all of the people who come here after midnite, And in your drunken state expect to be worshipped. I have this to tell you as you scream into the order box, I can hear you. I have this to tell you person stealing from McDonald's, I know what you're doing, I know your order, I gave you everything you asked for. I have this to tell you if you make a wisecass remark, like "no spit please," we are humans, not animals, not McRobots. We are Men and Women stuck in shit jobs, making ends, but no more, we work 9, 10, 11 hours a day, without a break. We have wives, families, and bills. This is no sob story it is just a call for basic human respect. What follows is a combo meal of reality, stories from two people,
real stories, about friends, family, and struggle. Enjoy, And Please Come Again.

Out of this first draft, which by itself was a rapturous and risky piece of writing, the student produced two more drafts, holding on to the motif of fast food boxes, cups and napkins through each. By the third draft, he had included information about the benefits provided to McDonald's employees, two additional photographs and bios of other co-workers, as well as newspaper clippings dealing with cases of violence and cruel behavior toward restaurant employees. The final version included a Works Cited page written on the inside of a Chicken McNugget's container. Each material artifact had the gritty presence of something "torn out by the roots," or of found photographs collaged into a seamless statement. In this project—which beautifully attends to both public and private aspects of working class angst and camaraderie—personal narrative, aesthetic experimentation, political fire, and the rubbish of our culture collide in words and pictures.

This dissertation has presented a range of activities that move students through activities that increase in rhetorical, ethical, and aesthetic complexity: Chapter I introduces ways of looking and designing that aren't explicitly related to political or ethical life, but that have ethical resonances; Chapter II discusses aesthetic strategies that produce ethical implications for the authorial self; and this chapter shows one writer using photography and research writing to turn his work experiences into a case study of the dehumanizing possibilities of minimum wage labor in one American workplace. Throughout, this progression from one assignment to the next has never valued thinking about politics, ethics, or morality over aesthetic concerns. I have tried to show that the artful and the ethical are two necessary aspects of a single, organic, rhetorical process of
composition. This organic relation never fades in student writing, even when students are dealing with the most pressing political issues. Chapter IV pushes this claim to its furthest limit. It continues to view aesthetics as a significant aspect of our politically and morally complex world, but it does so in light of historical events—and photographs—that are the most disturbing and morally challenging images our world has ever recorded.
CHAPTER IV

DISTURBING PLEASURE: PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE IM/POSSIBLE ETHICS OF CATASTROPHE

Mr. Brady has done something to bring home to us the terrible reality and earnestness of war. If he has not brought bodies and laid them in our dooryards and along the streets, he has done something very like it.... These pictures have a terrible distinctness. By the aid of the magnifying-glass, the very features of the slain may be distinguished.

—editorial in The New York Times, October 20, 1862 (Newhall 91, 94)

Poignant longings for beauty, for an end to probing beneath the surface, for a redemption and celebration of the body of the world—all these elements of erotic feeling are affirmed in the pleasure we take in photographs.

—Susan Sontag, On Photography (24)

There is beauty in ruins.

—Susan Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others (76)

This chapter investigates the cultural significance of disturbing photographs, a term Bruce Ballenger and Michelle Payne use to describe images that depict the human body mortally wounded or dead, by accident or act of violence. In The Curious Reader, they dedicate a chapter to the ethical challenges and uncertainties—faced by newspaper editors, photographers, writers, and consumers of the news—involved with determining which images are chosen for public presentation and the cultural implications of doing so. As it is part of a book designed to guide college writing students through the details and processes of scholarly investigation, the authors’ treatment of the topic scrupulously
avoids prescriptive claims, relying instead on interdisciplinary readings and broad questions to establish the topic's complexity. These readings and questions do an excellent job of addressing the ethical challenges such images pose to public discourse and journalistic practice.

What for me is most striking about the *Curious Reader* chapter, perhaps unsurprisingly, is its use of images that are disturbing. The full chapter title, “Reading and Writing across Disciplines: The Ethics of Publishing Disturbing Photos,” suggests an exercise in rhetorical analysis revolving around a particularly vexing public issue. The coolness of such a description belies the visceral impact of the images. Even though they are tightly woven into the structure of the chapter—only photos needed to exemplify the debates are shown—it is easy to lose track of the argument at hand and be caught up in the affective pull of visual shock. Even now, as I thumb through the chapter, I oscillate between an interest in the rhetorical gestures the writers make and a feeling of helplessness in the face of human devastation. The image of Iraqis celebrating over the charred corpses of American contractors, to take one example (*The Curious Reader* 439), disturbs me on multiple levels: because these men were ruthlessly murdered; because the men and boys in the image, presumably Iraqis, are euphoric in this violence; because my gut response to the image is not sensitive enough to the horror and cultural ruin Iraq has experienced; because I can very clearly see the ravaged corpse. In the grip of such disturbed feelings, fleeting and ambivalent as they may be, verbal arguments feel inadequate. Even embedded in an essay dealing with the “professional codes, ethical constraints, and thoughtful uncertainty” of news editors, and bound in a textbook for college writers, a photograph can disturb its rhetorical framework (446). I believe the
field of Composition needs more attempts, like Ballenger and Payne's, to address this issue and that ask the academic reader to confront the ways photographs of catastrophe disturb, for better and worse, the enactment of pedagogy.

There have been few such attempts. Two that do, and from which I derive some of the key questions of this chapter, are Michael Bernard-Donals's "Forgetful Memory and Images of the Holocaust" and Diana George and Diane Shoo's "Deflecting the Political in the Visual Images of Execution and the Death Penalty Debate." While Bernard-Donals focuses on Holocaust photographs, George and Shoos on images of public execution and the death penalty, both texts make a broader claim about all visual representations of atrocity—in sum, that the collective memory of any atrocity is constructed by a vast archive of artifacts (mainly photographs but also movies, novels, biographies, newspaper accounts, family anecdotes), and that this archival remembrance tends to hide or misrepresent a more complex and urgent reality.

The two essays grapple with the need to look more carefully at history and its images, beyond the usual narratives to be found in many commemorative sites (especially films and photo exhibitions). Both find common forms of remembrance lacking in accuracy and substance, and provide interpretive strategies that encourage a more sophisticated ethics of looking. Bernard-Donals, who promotes a kind of engagement with historical trauma he calls "forgetful memory," teaches us to read such images across the grain—to find in them details that reveal something radically unique and unexpected about the objects of the photo, and hence that interrupt the illusion that collective memory speaks for, or allows us to identify with, the victims of atrocity. He praises visual artists who distort the iconic photographs of the Holocaust by painting over,
scratching out, or otherwise defacing them, “in such a way that the blot itself becomes the 
object of memory” (396). “What we’re left with is just that loss,” he writes of these 
photographs that represent something beyond the iconic Holocaust image, “not a 
knowledge of what happened” but of “something that simply can’t be written, at least not 
in terms of our or our culture’s memory” (392). By disfiguring the conventional routes of 
memory, in other words, these images force the viewer into an uncomfortable relation to 
the past—one that functions, as a muted or secondary trauma, to disturb what we think 
we can know or feel about a destructive history (395, 399, 401n).

Diana George and Diane Shoos, likewise, wish to disturb a pat relation to the past, 
but in their case, the relevant kind of memory is more political than historical. In their 
study of visual representations of public executions—contemporary, state mandated 
killings as well as those incited by mob violence, particularly the racially motivated 
lynchings that were prominent in the American South during the early twentieth 
century—the authors find two kinds of vision, witnessing and voyeurism, that inflect the 
relation of the visual to political life. Witness designates “an inherently political act that 
brings an event to the public for scrutiny,” whereas voyeurism “denotes seeing or 
watching that evokes gratification or pleasure of some sort,” registered as “a shift in 
power from the person or event being seen to the observer of that event” (590). There are 
specific conventions to visual representation, they argue, that can help a viewer to resist 
the pull of “seamy voyeurism” (589) and to witness the fundamental public questions at 
hand—primarily, not whether an inmate on death row is innocent or guilty, but whether 
the state ever has the right, in the first place, to take his life.
In these two articles, what is most similar is their understanding that pleasure should be disturbed when looking at images of catastrophe.¹¹ I would like to investigate this concept of voyeurism or pleasurable looking, as it is often figured as a primary reason for the loss, deflection, or forgetting of political and historical meaning. For George and Shoos, we must militate against the pleasures of “popular visual narratives” and insist on a way of seeing that rejects simplistic and widespread responses to difficult cultural problems (588). For Bernard-Donals, we must learn to reject the pleasure of over-identifying with the suffering of victims—or trying to claim “surrogate victimage,” as Dominick LaCapra has called it (182)—as well as the pleasure that comes from a presumptuous “knowledge” of the historical facts of a traumatic event.¹² Faced with images of humanity’s endless capacity for cruelty, these authors call for a highly educated response that will sustain the atrocity as a disturbing presence in our intellectual and emotional lives, rather than as lurid spectacle or historical trivia. This begs the question of how pleasure enters our vision in the first place, and why (since it shadows vision at every turn) it is not a legitimate response to a traumatized past. I take up that question now, as I consider the ways American photographic culture has taken shape around, but never totally come to terms with, the viewing public’s scopophilic relation to catastrophe.

The Exquisite Corpse

As we have just seen, photography has the power to expose the body in a direct and disquieting way. War photography is probably the most enduring example of this—unless pornography is. The “terrible distinctness” of Civil War photography, as the
first epigraph at the beginning of this chapter suggests, allowed the American public to
gaze at the cadavers of war for the first time on a massive scale. In his sweeping *The
History of Photography from 1839 to the Present*, Beaumont Newhall writes of the first
extensive collection of war photographs, taken of the Crimean War by Roger Fenton, that
they lacked a close view of dead bodies. To “a public used to the conventional fantasies
of romantic battle painters, these photographs seemed dull, yet they recognized in them
the virtue of the camera as a faithful witness.” There seems to have been a default faith in
war photography as an utterly objective depiction of what happens on the battlefield, but
the public was not fascinated or even titillated by Fenton’s images, as Newhall indicates
with this quote from the *American Journal of Photography* of 1862: “The photographer
who follows in the wake of modern armies must be content with conditions of repose and
with the still life which remains when the fighting is over” (88). Newspaper editors knew
that these images, though “real,” did not convey the visceral reality of war.

Advancements in camera mechanics and photochemical processes would quickly
change this. Civil War photographers were the first, on a large scale, to use photography
to “cadaverize” the American imagination. Although still photographs of the human
body—eroticized or pornographic or as corpse—had already become a part of photo
archives throughout the world, Matthew Brady, Alexander Gardner, and Timothy
O’Sullivan were the first to place images of the human corpse in the “door-yards” of
America, as a mass journalistic enterprise. These photographers and those who followed
their lead had “done something to bring home to us the terrible reality and earnestness of
war,” inaugurating a new relationship between the foreignness of war and the visual lives
of citizens at home. Echoing André Bazin’s proposal that photography has finally
satisfied our psychological desire for a precise representation of reality, Newhall writes that

corpses abound in battle paintings since the Renaissance.... But O'Sullivan’s rifleman, lying in death, is a portrait. This man lived; this is the spot where he fell; this is how he looked at the very moment when he expired. Therein lies the great psychological difference between photography and the other arts; this is the quality that photography can transmit more strongly than can any other picture making. (94)

In Newhall’s lyrical treatment of this epoch in our nation’s history, we see his reverence for the achievement of Civil War photographers, their bravery in the heat of battle and their technical resourcefulness and virtuosity. These alone are compelling historical facts. However, what most fascinated the early viewers of Civil War photography, it seems, was not the enormous amount of death and destruction caused by the war, or the scope of its political ramifications, but that these images exposed actual human carnage with supernatural clarity. Though the sight of a human corpse may be (initially) shocking, such imagery is ultimately fascinating because it is photographic. When Newhall writes, “This man lived; this is the spot where he fell; this is how he looked at the very moment when he expired,” his clipped, almost tautological utterances point to the camera’s work. The nearness of the corrupted body, in a photo, is stunning. Unlike Fenton’s images of the Crimean War, which, though accurate and perhaps even beautiful, were “dull” because corpse-less, the realism of these images festered in the American.

This stunned relation with the pictured corpse is certainly a response to war, but of what kind? How did these early photographs structure our nation’s responsiveness to and remembrance of cultural destruction? Do such images convey the “earnestness” of war, its “true” dimensions? Did the Times writer’s “view” of war change after he saw
photographs of corrupted bodies? Is he more ethically sensitive to the war, or less? Does photography's supernatural clarity give a more direct access to the horrific nature of war, or does it insert a kind of distance between the viewer and reality, interrupting his capacity to think critically about the complex machinations of national politics, propaganda, and the mediated nature of subjectivity? That is, does the corpse in the "door-yard" become an endpoint of critical thought, or its beginning? By tapping into the mind's fascination with representations of the body, especially the body corrupted or disquieted, these images seem to make war more real. It would seem that today, still, the photograph of the corpse is a watermark for the reality of mortal conflict. Out of this affective state that haunts the moment of looking at human devastation, what ethical or political claims can be made?

More is at stake here than a remembrance of any single event and its photography. Considering the problems this list of questions evokes—the human fascination with images of the body, the photograph's tendency to decontextualize political issues, the dubious ethical status of war images—we can see that historically photography has played a large role in how and what our culture remembers or forgets. Rather than seeing these questions as restricted to war and its photography, in other words, we will position them at the head of a broader investigation into the ethics of looking. What might such questions offer writing teachers? First of all, they can help us to identify the ways our culture represents catastrophe, and to analyze how these representational practices encourage or inhibit a workable relation to a traumatized historical record. They might also give us a more competent means of reading individual student texts that deal with or have been marked by trauma, helping us teach the vertiginously difficult notion that there
is a relationship between public history, strategies of representation, and subjective memory, and that this triangular relation is manifested in the ways we write about death, war, and personal loss. And for those of us interested in teaching the photo-essay, a sophisticated understanding of this sort can help us articulate to our students, other teachers, and administrators why a photographic pedagogy is an important part of an ethically and aesthetically relevant education in the humanities.

**War Photography as Encrypted Pornography**

Any in-depth consideration of photography’s history reveals profound connections between photographic practice and human desire. Not only the choice of subject matter and the moment of clicking the shutter, but also how we archive, frame, and display our photographs, reveal something about how we desire them to be imagined by other eyes, how we desire them to touch upon and reanimate the past. Working with photography in any capacity—as amateur photographer, fashion agent, school yearbook compiler, photo-essayist, recorder of family events, military apologist, scientist, art critic or collector—is a means of working on the past, making claims on it, producing an affective relationship between future viewers and the historic reality supposedly captured by the image. Excluding images meant to provide purely technical information (e.g., satellite stills used by military strategists—though clearly the use of these may also be guided by particular political desires), photographs now play an active role in shaping what we remember, as well as how we remember, that is, how we should feel about a past event while looking at images of it. It is not hard to imagine that the act of looking at the past, in this age of photographic remembering, is fraught with confusions between what
we see and what we want or need to see. The ethical status of photographic looking and remembering is anything but certain. Many artists, journalists, and teachers share Barbie Zelizer’s concern that photography might divert us from responding appropriately to the traumatic events of contemporary history, or as she puts it, might hinder our ability to “develop representational forms … that nourish moral response” (220).

As a fundamental example of the uncertain moral condition of photography in responding to human disaster, consider the relation between graphic war images and pornography. Photographic treatments of war have often been equated with or accused of pandering to a kind of pornographic curiosity (e.g., Sontag, On Photography 15, and Regarding the Pain of Others 41; Struk 204-07). In some instances, the pornographic quality of the image can be defined conventionally, as an exploitation of the body, intended to arouse sexual excitement. In Photographing the Holocaust, Janina Struk notes a disagreement between Sharon Muller and James Taylor—respectively, the photo archivist and curator at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum—regarding the museum’s possession of photographs depicting “a savage public assault on women” in Lvov in (72). Muller was uncomfortable displaying the disturbing, graphic images, condemning them as “basically pornographic” (204), whereas Taylor saw them as “the worst photographs of the Holocaust” and maintained that “for this reason they should be shown.” “It is because they show women that they shock in the way that photography can, and so might, presumably,” Struk concludes, “be arousing to some people” (205). An aroused response of this sort, Struk suggests, goes against the kind of ethical responsiveness the Museum should inspire in its visitors.
In other instances, the pornographic quality is defined according to the way the viewer is allowed and, in certain contexts, encouraged to revel in a long, uninhibited gaze at the photographic subject matter. In this case, it is not only the Composition of the image, but the viewer’s response, especially as that response manifests a kind of scopic pleasure, that marks it as pornographic. In Struk’s research through thousands of Holocaust photographs, for example, what she found more disturbing than the generically pornographic images (photos of explicit sexual brutality and of corpses) were those of the “constant repetition of low-level harassment—taunting, jeering, pushing, poking—[which were] sometimes more difficult to look at than more overtly horrific images” (206). This is pornography, Struk contends. Along these lines she critiques propaganda created by the Nazis, but also that produced by the Allies as a means of combating Nazi ideology. Allied propaganda, in its use of atrocity images that flowed into the U.S. from Poland and Russia in the early years of the war, also compromised the dignity of its photographed subjects. But even in the case of images in which the body is not corrupted, whether or not they are “perp” photos (images produced by the Nazis or, more generally, the perpetrators), Struk identifies a pornographic impulse to look which dehumanizes those subjects to whom it is urgent we respond with empathy (215). For Struk, the fact that many such images have been preserved in our most revered memory sites does not keep them from turning the Holocaust into a source of commercial profit and aesthetic pleasure.

In the most general terms, then, for both overtly and covertly pornographic images, or for any image intended as a witness to catastrophic history, distance seems to pose an ethical challenge. We are either too far away from the event, or else the affective
distance, between the body in the image and our own, is collapsed. For Struk, the specularity of photography too often functions as a distancing device: to look in this way is to install an insuperable gap between self and other, to derive pleasure from this gap, and thus to shunt the possibility of an empathic connection between viewer and viewed. Either that, or our look erases a very real distance, one that cannot and should not be bridged, by appropriating the suffering of another as if it were one’s own.

In this argument, over-amplifying or collapsing this distance is a means of not responding to catastrophic reality, by subordinating the political and historical context of these photographs to the neurotic needs of the ego. For Struk, the indiscriminate commercialization and consumption of images of war atrocities, displayed in official and unofficial memory sites, colludes with wartime propaganda. To look at these images now—to be titillated by photographs of the corrupted body, to experience human devastation as a euphoric confrontation with images of death, brutality, and public humiliation—is to extend the psychological brutality of fascism. The wrong kind of look participates, in a muted and perhaps unconscious way, in the aestheticisation of human suffering. It seems that looking at disturbing photography is doomed to ignite an erotic interaction (either enthrallment with the object as an erotic object, or disavowal of the historical difference between the victim’s suffering and the viewer’s life in the present) regardless of the photographer’s intentions or the viewer’s political inclinations.

Sontag’s Negative Epiphany and the Critique of Pleasure

There is no need to restrict our thinking here to images of war. One of the founding moments in a broader cultural critique of photography as a threat to empathy was Susan
Sontag’s *On Photography*, published in 1977, which asserted that our capacity to respond appropriately to the suffering of others is degraded by the world’s glut of photographic images. Acknowledging that, on the one hand, seeing an image of atrocity makes that atrocity more real, and yet, on the other hand, seeing too many images of atrocity dulls our sense of its reality, Sontag positions photography as both a redemptive aspect of modernity and its originary curse (18, 20). For the Sontag of 1977, it is mostly a curse. The endless supply of photographic images has seared open an abyss between reality and its overly aestheticised reception by the bourgeoisie:

Photographs shock insofar as they show something novel. Unfortunately, the ante keeps getting raised—partly through the very proliferation of such images of horror [as those taken during the liberation of the death camps in Poland]. One’s first encounter with the photographic inventory of ultimate horror is a kind of revelation, the prototypically modern revelation: a negative epiphany. (19)

Sontag presents us here with a paradox. First of all, on an unmatched scale, photography offers an epiphany—a visual experience so stunning in its force it presents itself negatively, as an absence of lucidity and understanding. The negative epiphany induced by certain images is so novel, so new and uninterpretable, that the mind’s capacity for explanatory narrative is temporarily put out of service. When first facing photographs of corrupted, catastrophized bodies, vision serves not as a passive means of registering experience—as happens with common, everyday looking—but as a wound, as sight ravaged. No narrative provides understanding, since the reality presented there seems to exceed the imagination. Merely to look at such images, in other words, risks something like a traumatic encounter. Sontag offers as an example her own childhood experience of seeing images from Bergen-Belsen and Dachau, which divided her life into “before and after” the moment of looking: “When I looked at those photographs, something broke.”
Some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror; I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded, but a part of my feelings started to tighten; something went dead; something is still crying” (20). When confronting such a limit-event, Sontag suggests, horrific images serve an ethical function. They rupture normal, everyday ways of looking—particularly the disinterested gaze of the leisure class—by denying the disaster any access to beauty. The horror of the pictured event is un-aesthetic to the bone, presented so clearly, plainly, that it cannot be transcended by the hedonistic, bourgeois expectation of aesthetic pleasure. Words are unsatisfactory and perhaps unnecessary in such extreme moments.

On the other side of this paradox, the endless proliferation and public display of catastrophe images—which, Sontag observes, have “gained the status of ethical reference points”—weakens the empathic force of photography (21). With too much exposure, the negative epiphany gives way not only to familiarity but also to a kind of pious sadness, “a mournful vision of loss” that produces a sophisticated experience of pleasure (67). The “ante keeps getting raised,” she warns, meaning that at stake is our ability to avoid a morally deadening aestheticism. It becomes imperative that we inscribe political and moral narratives onto such images, for only “that which narrates can make us understand” (23). To consume the aesthetic pleasures of disaster photography without narrative understanding, as if the images “speak for themselves,” is to experience the constant flow of such images as an aspect of the banal visual environment—that is, as kitsch. Presumably, photography, absorbed so thoroughly into capitalism and our sense of the mundane, jeopardizes humanity. “The shock of photographed atrocities wears off with repeated viewings,” she insists, “just as the surprise and bemusement felt the first time one sees a pornographic movie wear off after one sees a few more” (20). In this way, On
Photography links photographic culture to an erotic, scopophilic relation between the viewer and the world, especially the world that serves as other to the image devouring middle-class.

Surrealism, Nostalgia, and “The Amorous Relation”

In 1977, Sontag offered no practical solution to this paradox, insisting that when it comes to commemorative strategies, the pursuit of photographic beauty degrades moral integrity. “Photographs turn the past into an object of tender regard,” she writes, “scrambling moral distinctions and disarming historical judgments by the generalized pathos of looking at time past” (71). Since all photographs attest to the loss of time, in other words, they are powerful producers of nostalgia. Even if intended as scientific and documentary objects, photographs inevitably exude an aura of loss and decay, and consequently produce a kind of aesthetic pleasure, a “generalized pathos.”

Eadward Muybridge’s early frames of a horse galloping, for example, are now more valuable as art objects than as scientific data. Sometimes simply the pretense of age evokes a nostalgic quality. (The look of agedness—suggested by the use of black-and-white film as well as worn edges, a golden patina, imperfections on the film surface—is so valuable, in fact, that all image-manipulating programs now include special effects that make new images appear old and faded, a process often termed “antiquing.”) This points to what Sontag calls the “nostalgia for some pristine state of the photographic enterprise” (124). In this view, to get one’s picture taken at an amusement park, costumed as an outlaw or sheriff, does not so much manifest a desire to identify with the Old West as it does a fascination with photography’s inherent ability to entomb an irretrievable time.
Contrast photography's inherent propensity for nostalgia, alongside the ethical burden of witnessing the suffering of others, and it is clear why Sontag's solution to the problem of photography, decidedly impractical, is to create an "ecology not only of real things but of images as well" (180). Only narrative writing, she insists, can redeem the sacred force of photography's negative epiphany and "ecologize" (or economize) it so it might withstand the bourgeois lust for nostalgic beauty (155-56).

Sontag does not provide a practical means of controlling the bourgeois desire for a photo-beautified reality, but she does reveal who popularized it: surrealism. In 1977, she considered the Surrealist sensibility "a bourgeois disaffection" (54) comprised mostly of "a few witty fantasies, mostly wet dreams and agoraphobic nightmares" (51), embodying all that is self-indulgent and dangerous about modernism. Unlike nineteenth century philosophy, which was reproached by Marx for "trying to understand the world rather than trying to change it," surrealist photographers "suggest the vanity of even trying to understand the world and instead propose that we collect it" (82). Furthermore, Sontag effectively demonstrates that all photographs, under the camera's relentlessly beautifying eye, are surrealist at heart:

Illustrating that partly jubilant, partly condescending relation to reality that is the rallying point of Surrealism, the photographer's insistence that everything is real also implies that the real is not enough. By proclaiming a fundamental discontent with reality, Surrealism bespeaks a posture of alienation which has now become a general attitude [in the West].... In the past, a discontent with reality expressed itself as a longing for another world. In modern society, a discontent with reality expresses itself forcefully and most hauntingly by the longing to reproduce this one. (80)

Everywhere she looks, Sontag finds surrealism's haunted longing to fragment reality into an array of de-realized, reproducible art objects. Indeed, popular discourse on photography suggests the camera has an uncanny power to derive beauty from
everything; any bit of cultural detritus can end up in a picture and so is capable of beauty.
The camera, democratic in the strictest sense, erases the distinction between objects of
high and low culture. The Paris photos of Eugene Atget, to take one famous example,
reveal this. The film American Beauty also reveals it quite well. The movie’s slogan,
“Look closer,” emphasizes the role of camera technology in revealing America’s lost,
melancholic beauty. It probably did not surprise Sontag that the most visually stunning
scene in the film, shot through the young protagonist’s viewfinder, is of a piece of
rubbish—an empty bag slowly floating and twisting on an eddy current of air along an
empty street. “Sometimes there’s so much beauty in the world, I feel like I can’t take it,”
he says as he stares at the bag whirling ghostlike on the screen. As the tears stream down
his face, he reminds us that nostalgia is an aesthetic commodity in our culture and that the
flâneur with a camera has found it haunting every gutter of modern life (55).

With Sontag’s attack on photo aesthetics in mind, we might suspect that Civil
War photography neither mobilized public resistance to war, nor sustained sensitivity to
the suffering of others, nor even articulated how war alters American culture and society.
In truly surrealist fashion, what was produced was a series of images—infinitely
reproducible in different media contexts and for different political purposes—that
fascinated, shocked, disgusted, and aroused the viewing public, perhaps simultaneously.
The first mass circulated war images, like those of today, are spectral: they introduce a
haunted longing for more photographs of war, a haunting that is repeated when we yearn
to know (or see) something about, for instance, warfare in the Middle East, crimes
perpetrated by American soldiers, or mass murders and other human calamities that seem
to be a common aspect of modern globalized life. For Sontag, to be a photographer is a
lustful act. And "like all credible forms of lust," she writes, photography "cannot be satisfied: first, because the possibilities of photography are infinite; and, second, because the project is finally self-devouring" (179). She suggests that to look upon photographs without moral and narrative instruction, especially harrowing photographs, is to risk being swept up in an addictive behavior that can blind all of society to human cruelty and suffering.

For the Sontag of 1977, then, only morally confident writing removes photography from this cycle of consumerist need and fulfillment. "In contrast to the amorous relation, which is based on how something looks," she writes, "understanding is based on how it functions. And functioning takes place in time. Only that which narrates can make us understand" (23). That is, critical writing is the practical solution to Sontag's paradox. The phrase "ecology of images" refers not to images, but to the power of words to delimit, conserve, and allot significance to the photographic world. As Sontag, Struk, Zelizer, and many others have noted, and as history repeatedly demonstrates, the mechanical precision of the camera and the reproducibility of photographs have not supplied the world with privileged access to truth. Photography may in fact work against the truth that has come to be associated with historical accuracy. (All the writers discussed in this chapter, except Beaumont Newhall, offer versions of this point). A catastrophe photograph's truth—at its root, a confirmation that images of cruelty, devastation, and suffering exist, to be perused in our leisure—can fire the passions and vitalize preexisting convictions, but it cannot prove them morally sound or explain the political spaces we inhabit. Only written narrative can transmit moral feelings and stabilize the ebb and flow of photographic meaning.
This argument raises thorny issues for the writing classroom. Though *On Photography*’s obsessive attention to the medium suggests a deep respect for and fascination with the visual arts, Sontag’s conflation of “haunted longing” with perverse desire seems to undermine the pedagogical value of photography. It suggests that debating the ethics of photojournalism is a moot point, shocking images are not to be a commodity of education (unless as a critique of bourgeois aesthetics), and teachers must strive to immunize citizens against the compulsions of visual culture (especially intellectual laziness). Contrary to her otherwise trenchant cultural insights, Sontag reveals a sense of literacy reminiscent of “back to basics” neo-conservatives at their most alarmist:

> There is a rancorous suspicion in America of whatever seems literary, not to mention a growing reluctance on the part of young people to read anything, even subtitles in foreign movies and copy on a record sleeve, which partly accounts for the new appetite for books of few words and many photographs. (74)

Sontag defends Art against photography’s populist invasion. She sides with Plato’s indictment of the Image as a sham, as a second-hand form of knowledge, but goes further to situate the photograph as the most deceptive image of all, since it is a representation that is also a slice of the real and therefore more apt to confuse the boundary between reality and replica. Photographic culture has developed an image-fraud so pervasive that it erodes the very foundations of human knowledge. The division between reality and replica matters less every day, supplanted by “the new appetite.”

But were subtitles, as one of many texts in popular culture, ever immediately appealing to youth culture? And how has Sontag gained this intimate knowledge of how America’s youth reads record sleeves? How and why this sudden outburst against “young
people” and their appropriation of images? The more photographic a culture is, she
insists, the less literate it will be. This is Sontag’s only reference to the literacy habits of
“young people,” and she offers no empirical evidence of her claim, so we can’t fully
distill her meaning. But we can pose a good guess: not enough reading and too much
photography makes for bad writers.

Why does Sontag—like many others, from Baudelaire to Struk—situate verbal
narrative as the birthplace of moral understanding, photography as its graveyard? Perhaps
because at its roots, any photograph is semiotically unstable. Sontag links the
photograph’s lack of stable meaning to a perversion of knowledge: “In contrast to the
amorous relation, which is based on how something looks, understanding is based on
how it functions.” Here, the pursuit of aesthetic pleasure through photography seems to
be a bourgeois dalliance, an amorous relation that weakens political understanding, a
non-response to the overwhelming evidence that we live in a world filled with horror and
devastation. Understanding from this perspective is a shaking off of the haunted longing
evoked by the image, an aggressively intellectual rejection of the seamy, voyeuristic
pleasure evoked by the camera. Surrealist aesthetics and popular visual narratives figure
the photograph as a ghostly lure, filled with nostalgic, amorous power. Sontag’s
argument asks the viewer to wipe his eyes clean of this web of haunted longing. We must
look at photos of atrocity with steely-eyed austerity, insisting always on the existence of a
reality that came before our look, which is to say, before the enactment of our own
anxieties and desires onto the surface of the image.
Disturbing Pleasure

While Sontag never fully abandoned her moral doubts about photography, she did change her stance on the function of “aestheticization.” In her final book, Regarding the Pain of Others, she still positions narrative as the only valid source of political understanding, but now accepts that photography itself serves a crucial role in personal and national forms of remembrance: “narratives make us understand: photographs do something else. They haunt us” (89). This is a major departure from her earlier text, where the aestheticized fog of nostalgia and beauty made photographs morally dubious. In the later text, she insists that we must allow ourselves to be haunted by the world’s images of suffering. In the high-speed circuitry of our globalized image-economy, she notes with melancholy, such images will never be in short supply. “There isn’t going to be an ecology of images,” she writes; “no Committee of Guardians is going to ration horror, to keep fresh its ability to shock. And the horrors themselves are not going to abate” (108).

More surprisingly, Sontag acknowledges that some degree of visual pleasure is a fundamental aspect of moral existence. She observes that traffic builds up after an accident because people want to “see something gruesome” (96), and that “sights of degradation and pain and mutilation” have often been experienced as an aspect of the sublime (97). Rather than rejecting this as “seamy voyeurism,” she situates it as a primary aesthetic experience, “a kind of transfiguration … rooted in religious thinking, which links pain to sacrifice, sacrifice to exaltation” (99). In other words, the proliferation of distressing photographs can do more than inspire mindless consumption. Meditating on them can turn the viewer’s experience of looking, into a realization that “human beings everywhere do terrible things to one another” (116).
In “Picturing Violence: Aesthetics and the Anxiety of Critique,” Mark Reinhardt extends this argument. He suggests that, though a photograph depicting “extreme violence” may not “promote critical vision or deepen understanding,” it can transfigure that violence into “the subject of a photo that insists one pay sustained attention to its formal features”: “It is precisely through its aesthetic strategies” that a harrowing image “invites both critical engagement and a kind of metacritical reflection on the mass-mediated character of disaster” (26). To those who insist we must not transfigure horrific events, that we must leave them as they are, Reinhardt responds, “What is the alternative to transfiguration? ... It is not as if a photograph of human suffering could simply be without aesthetic properties, thus avoiding ... the generation of thought and feeling through the interaction between ... form and content (27).”

In Reinhardt’s critique of the anti-pleasure argument—he calls it “the moral disapproval of spectacle,” a “critical anxiety,” “iconoclasm” (27)—it is clear that he and the later Sontag are addressing the link between aesthetic experience and critical thinking, between form and content, not as a problem but as a potent means of coping with human devastation.xvii

The aim of this chapter is not to promote all out hedonism or to denigrate the hope for a more just society. To be sure, the anti-pleasure argument is laudable: it searches for forms of remembrance that can acknowledge the horrors of the past without repeating them, without trivializing their horror and intensity, and without striving for “surrogate victimage.” However, it also launches a moral campaign against beauty that I think is misplaced in an undergraduate writing course. It is certainly feasible to have students analyze the form and content of disturbing images, and to have them reflect in writing on
how the act of looking opens ethically charged questions. It is less reasonable to expect inexperienced writers to surrender, at the classroom door, the commemorative practices and coping mechanisms they bring with them from their home communities. Instead of asking students to reject the aesthetic for the sake of the ethical, how might we weave the two categories together? How can beauty and pleasure become means toward metacritical reflection? Rather than worrying about the pleasure that arises between an image and students, how might teachers use the pleasure and beauty of photography to prompt writing?

I have developed a few assignments that I think help me reach these pedagogical goals. Before I discuss those, however, I want to think again about the essays mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, by Bernard-Donals and George and Shoos. Both articles encourage active work with the images of atrocity, as I do. But there is a feature of their language that bothers me, and that I suspect shapes how their students are required to think and feel about photography. In George and Shoos, it is the term “voyeurism.” This word turns the human compulsion to see the corrupted body into a distinct, categorical perversion—and worse, it makes the casual viewer a perpetrator of the original crime. “Do not look at these images on your own,” the authors seem to say. And by “on your own,” of course they mean, “in the way that the mass public views them.” The habits of communal looking are too pleasurable, the authors imply, and what is needed is a substantial dose of de-centered, radically uncomfortable art to clear (obscure) your vision.

Bernard-Donals is also anxious about communal, public modes of looking, and the pleasures it produces. For instance, he praises art that fixates on a fractured memory
of the Holocaust "in such a way that the blot itself becomes the object of memory" (396), encouraging a kind of memory that "makes itself felt as a presence, though a terrifying one, that is characterized not so much by loss as by physical trauma" (401n). This desire for a "physical trauma" that terrifies suggests a fixation not on the event itself, but on its promise of an enduring traumatic disturbance, one that is impervious to cultural systems of mourning (such as those practiced in both Christian and Jewish traditions). Dominick LaCapra writes that such a perspective tends to fixate on "trauma as an unclaimed experience that occasions the paradoxical witnessing of the breakdown of witnessing" (183). It is as if this pedagogy took sadistic pleasure in restricting access to those public forms of coping that provide an escape from the pain of a truly ethical remembering.

I make this point not to criticize the sadism inherent in the academic analysis of limit-events—I certainly take part in it, as a scholar interested in the history and cultural value of photography—but to demonstrate that much critical work attempts to replace one kind of pleasure with another that is deemed morally appropriate. Also, the critical pleasure involved with studying extreme events is rarely acknowledged, if not fully repressed. (Bernard-Donals, for example, does not acknowledge the potential parallel between his own desire for a terrifying trauma, and the sadistic pleasure, as Freud tells us, that the melancholic derives from directing hostility toward the self.) This results in students being criticized for attempting to achieve a kind pleasure when confronting disturbing images, as if the academic approach to similar images is somehow free of voyeuristic tendencies. An anecdote, told to me by a colleague, suggests that this simply isn’t true. He had attended a conference presentation dealing with atrocity photographs
and the ethics of remembering, during which the presenter vehemently argued that academics must champion a kind of looking that will help students ethically confront historical atrocity. At the end of her talk, the presenter turned out the lights, fired up her overhead projector, and clicked through image after disturbing image, apparently to demonstrate why her argument was so worthy of critical interest. This implies an academic compulsion to voyeurism that may even exceed that found in more popular, non-academic forms of remembering.\textsuperscript{xix}

This is simply to say, we are less likely to criticize our own image practices than those of our students. Consider, for example, what I feel to be the undue anxiety Bernard-Donals expresses when he writes, at the conclusion of his poignant rumination over Holocaust photographs, that if we do not teach students to resist collective memory, we risk recalling the event as if it were a scene from a movie:

My students told me, with little irony at all, that as they watched the planes crash into the World Trade Center they thought it looked just like a movie, evidence enough that the effectiveness of a visual representation has come dangerously close to supplanting evidence of the event as the benchmark of authenticity. (399)

This reflects a concern over historical forgetting and, by extension, a fear that aspects of historical atrocity will be allowed to repeat. It also reflects anxiety over the phantasmic fabrication of reality as a populist form of visual consumerism. Because of its association with collective visuality, it seems, the cinematic analogy is dangerous. The pleasure it produces is distinctly public, with an expectation that it will be understood by others in the movie theater. Movies, because of our familiarity with their conventions, turn even the most “terrifying ... physical trauma” into something that can be tolerated.
I submit that teachers need to be more tolerant of such homely tricks of the mind. It is our way of coping with unimaginable, unspeakable, unbearable events. I believe it was Wallace Stevens who wrote, “In the presence of extraordinary reality, consciousness takes the place of imagination”—a provocative comment on what is lost in the realm of trauma: the luxury of one’s imagination. Our students often, though not always, lack our rhetorical sophistication and more considerable life experiences, and therefore tend to lack the means we have at our disposal, as academics, for gaining pleasure from ethical and political researches into extreme history.xx

We have numerous reasons to suspect that the compulsion to look at the human form, both whole and fragmented, is hardwired into our species. A pedagogy that uses photographs must deal with this compulsion head on, since the body is manifest in photography as it is in no other visual mode (except for theater and dance, neither of which we can hold in our pocket like a photograph). The three sample assignments listed below are my attempt at helping students deal with this compulsion to look and to find formal meaning in the world, even the world destroyed. In line with Bernard-Donals and George and Shoos, I want to use photography as a way to think about history. But like Sontag and Reinhardt, I also designed the activities as a way to help students enjoy photographs aesthetically, as beautiful things that follow events that, in themselves, are anything but beautiful.
Sample Assignment #4

Photographic Remembering and Catastrophic Events

[Originally assigned September 11, 2006]

What images remind us of the September 11th attacks? What stories have we told ourselves, and to what end? Do the photos from 2001 still resonate with us?

Who is the “us”? Do the narratives and photographs of 9/11 construct a sense of us-ness? Are there images that don’t? Are there images that make you feel differently—aliénated, separate, inward, meditative? Where are those images? Who took them? Under what circumstances?

Do any of these images challenge you? “Challenge” can mean more than sad. It can also mean disturb, perplex, provoke, stimulate. It can mean that an image makes you doubt or question rather than making you reassured and comfortable.

Are any of these images beautiful? Can such an image be beautiful? Can the horrific be beautified? (What, then, is beauty?)

What do such images have to do with you? Or, what do you have to do with them? How might you impact the visual world? In this image-economy filled with photographs of death and calamity, what is your role? Will the images you weave into this essay, for example, alter, support, or challenge the public use of images?

How do photographs shape how we remember an event?

Find images from magazines and newspapers or even personal albums that remind you of the attacks of September 11th, or simply of that year in your life. Begin writing with these images in front of you. Your content does not have to focus on the attacks or even anything explicitly political, but your overall narrative will be an attempt to commemorate this moment in your history as well as the nation’s.

Figure 4. Sample Assignment #4

A number of the texts students produced for this assignment illustrate what I have tried to argue in this chapter. One student lamented the seeming lack of moral outrage in the American public regarding war and global suffering, expressing an ambivalent relationship with some of America’s most enduring images of calamity. “We need pictures,” she writes, “or else it seems like we feel nothing,” and yet “movies and television have numbed us to a point about what’s going on in the world.”
When September 11th happened, no one really knew how to react, but what I heard the most from people was that the whole thing was like a movie. It’s unfortunate that we can just easily link a horrible terrorist attack to the movies we create. They’re not the same thing.

As Bernard-Donals noted about his classrooms, students did indeed speak of “experiencing” the attacks as if they had been scenes in a movie. This writer reveals the indignation of a viewer who has realized that this common, culturally accepted response to atrocity is too shallow. The “movies we create” are a sign that imagination has taken the place of reality, and that consequently humanity is suffering a crisis of empathy.

What I really find valuable in this essay, though, isn’t its adherence to a politically correct anger at her peers, but its ambivalence. We need photographs or we risk feeling nothing, she writes, and yet when we do feel something, it is contrived and we lose sight of the actual event. She despises the photographs for what they have done to her society, and yet she is searching for something in them, something authentic, uncontrived. She is searching for an aesthetic engagement with her photographs, while sustaining a critique of how they have distanced viewers from reality.

For this student, the ambiguity was deep, and generative. Discussing the Vietnam era image of a monk in the process of self-immolation, she cannot clearly distinguish between the historic reality depicted by the image, and her own imaginative investment in the scene of suffering:

I guess it’s a good thing that people react to pictures the way they do. My first instinct, however, is to get mad at us as a people. We wait for a picture until we react. And I feel like a lot of times, we are reacting to the picture and not necessarily what is actually going on. When I look at the [Vietnam era] picture of the burning monk, and all the pictures I printed, my reaction is ‘that’s awful.’ But the truth is that it’s more than awful. Someone set [himself] on fire in protest of a war. That is crazy to even think about. I don’t approve of the war going on, but there is no way I would kill myself, or anyone else, in protest.
The ambiguity of this paragraph is in its space between the “I” and the “us,” between the community responding with passivity, and the I responding with rage. The paragraph epitomizes for me the true resourcefulness of students, the authenticity of their ways of looking and feeling: this writer has learned that “we” should not respond to horrific events with passivity and that if disturbing photographs are going to be used for moral purposes, than all of us need to be enraged. Yet, the last three sentences twist away from the concern for a communal experience, and assert the writer’s sense of self-preservation. Confronted with an image whose reality tears at the imagination, this writer decides to let the monk burn on his own. She refuses the muted or secondary trauma that this image makes available (“crazy to even think about”) and instead allows her affective response to the image stand in contrast to her more explicitly political comments. In this way, she accomplishes the impossible: she looks closely at photographs as both a member of a community and as an individual.

I think this is as much as I can ask from such an assignment. The writer grappled with the difficult boundary between communal engagement (the “us as a people”) and personal expression (“There is no way I would kill myself”). And if this piece were to go into revision, I would not want this fierce expression of self to be abdicated for the sake of a historical analysis of the Vietnam War. I would certainly accept such an analysis, but it is this writer’s stylistic engagement with the images that allows the photographs as such to remain a part of the essay’s overall form.

The next sample assignment works well in conjunction with the readings in Ballenger and Payne’s The Curious Reader, mentioned at the start of this chapter.
end goal is an essay, done in the style of a newspaper editorial or column, that incorporates one or more disconcerting photographs.

Sample Assignment #5

The Impossible Task of the Photo Editor

[This activity follows from a series of readings that deal with the troubled ethics of photojournalism. Students have been talking about images of atrocity and other shocking pictures for two weeks leading up to this day. Still, as a rule, I emphasize to them in advance that there will be 20 unsettling images taped around the room. I give each of them the option of skipping the activity; nobody has done so, yet.]

With your class notebook and a pen in hand, walk around the room and look closely at each photograph. For each, write down the number of the image and either “yes” or “no,” depending on whether or not you would allow the image to be shown in your local newspaper.

In small groups, choose three images to be shown on the front page. Why have you chosen these above the others? Are there visual features that make them stand out above the others? Formally, what is most striking about the image—the lighting, Composition, use of color, visual symmetry? Does it remind you of any other scenes, photographic, painted, or cinematic?

At your own desk, write a brief paragraph about each image. What words do you imagine will accompany each image? Why do you think these words have presented themselves to you? What is it about the image that makes it worth being written about?

Finally, spend 10 minutes reflecting on the strangeness of this exercise. What did it feel like looking at these photographs and thinking, for example: “How does the lighting direct the viewer’s eye?” or “I like the symmetry in this scene.” This is certainly not how we’ve learned to approach images like this—if, in fact, we’ve ever learned. Which leads to the most important question: What are you learning about looking? What does close, intimate work with distressing images teach us about the suffering of others?

Figure 5. Sample Assignment #5

In the very next class, we follow up with a cropping assignment.
Sample Assignment #6

The Art of the Crop

[Before this day, students will have worked closely with a number of images. To begin the activity, I hand each student four 12x2 inch strips of black construction paper. Again, students are able to opt out of this activity if it proves too distressing; however, in my experience, students are always interested in the work.]

On your desk in front of you, spread out the three photographs you have been working with. Use the strips as the four sides of a box, for which each side can slide in or out, and place the open “window” of this box directly over one of the images. By sliding the lateral and top/bottom strips, crop distinct areas of the image. Do so with each image, marking with your pencil the location of the best crop.

How does cropping the image change its rhetorical potential? Where are the viewer’s eyes drawn, when you cut out bits of the scene? When focusing in on a face, hands, a bit of the dirt, how have you limited the viewer’s experience of this image? How can we do this kind of work in our writing?

Figure 6. Sample Assignment #6

These three assignments are all challenging because they ask students to pore over disturbing photographs formally, as aesthetic objects, but also conceptually, as potential sources of argument and narrative. Between form and content, we arrive at a more complex sense of how these images work on us. If consciousness takes the place of imagination in times of great duress, as Wallace Stevens once wrote, then these activities are a means of reasserting the imagination. By using their creative eye—looking for visual patterns, looking for a formal coherence—and working on these images that cripple the imagination, students are given some small, fragile, probably temporary bit of agency. This work is never pleasurable in the sense of fun or light hearted—but, impossibly, with care and imagination, these unthinkable, unspeakable scenes become transfigured in the work students do. And, for better or worse, it is a transformation that can only take place through the photographic image.
EPILOGUE

This dissertation proposes a sequence of writing assignments that attempt to merge a sensitivity to aesthetics with an awareness of ethics and politics. Moving between the first and last chapters, I show how students are encouraged to engage increasingly more complex issues of visual pleasure and social obligation. What has been emphasized in each case is the inseparability of aesthetics and politics—a disturbing proposition when, as in Chapter IV, the stakes of photographic looking are so high. I have not proposed historical or political insensitivity, but have contended that the photograph does not allow viewers to ultimately settle the question over whether or not it is an art object, or a political object—it is both, I have suggested, and in this ever split identity, in this radical ambiguity, the photograph becomes an ideal tool for teaching.

The classroom practices introduced in Chapter I are meant to teach aesthetic strategies commonly used by professional photographers, both artists and journalists. Since these practices are historically and culturally specific, engaging in them allows us to investigate our society’s artistic habits, as well as to interrogate why, personally, we find certain images beautiful, disgusting, boring, etc. The first museum exhibit of William Eggleston (published in book form as William Eggleston’s Guide 2002), which serves as the basis for our work with photography in that chapter, demonstrates how aesthetic predispositions serve political ends—most early critics of Eggleston hated his images, and vehemently resisted the presentation of his photographs. Also, however, those critics’ emotional responses to Eggleston show us that politics and aesthetics exist on a two-way street—one’s political stance shapes one’s affective response to certain
photographs, and one’s sense of the beautiful or the ugly inform the tenor of one’s political sensibilities. We cannot sift out affect from political thinking, as social semiotics seems to imply.

The rest of the chapters follow something like a traditional curricular trajectory, moving from personal writing to the research essay to more complex forms of critical thinking. However, critical thinking is never disconnected from an interest in style, aesthetics, and the affective power of photography. When we reach the cropping activity at the end of Chapter IV, it becomes impossible, unimaginable, to detach our sense of that visual work with the critical task of thinking about a damaged history. In the writing such photo activities produce, what makes writing good is both political and artful.

That is to say, the claims about photography I’ve made here are part of the ongoing concerns in Composition regarding the tensions between style and politics, the personal and the communal, aesthetics and ethics—all key issues that have been with the field since its beginnings, as I discuss in the introduction. I feel that photography offers a compelling way to bring this tension to the surface, without privileging one term over the other. More to the point, the photographic theories and practices discussed here present a model of the writing classroom that always pushes for the middle space, between an interest in pleasure and the beautiful, and an interest in social justice and the horrific. I realize this is not a simple, easy, or always possible goal. Sometimes, aesthetic concerns tend to drown out political concerns, and vice versa.

This is why I have reached beyond conventional Composition theory to construct my approach to writing instruction. By and large, I think it can sometimes be too easy for members of a discipline to recycle familiar theoretical claims and presuppositions,
rather than reaching further for fresh perspectives. This insight comes to me from personal experience. In the first year of my Ph.D. program, I attended a conference on Composition and Rhetoric, from which I remember only two speakers: Peter Elbow and David Bleich. These are widely regarded scholars in our field, both somewhat iconic figures for a particular approach to the classroom. I can’t recall the content of their presentations, but I do remember that after each presentation, as people were milling about and chatting, somebody said about Peter Elbow’s talk, “I have no idea what he was talking about.” Later, just after David Bleich’s presentation, I heard a different teacher use the exact same phrase about Bleich: “I have no idea what he was talking about.”

This dissertation has been an attempt to have an idea about, to genuinely understand, what each of the dominant approaches to writing instruction have to say. They do not often speak to each other and sometimes when they do, it is to criticize, denounce, and discard. My goal here has been to produce scholarship that takes the claims, values, and biases of each of them seriously. Again, I believe a photographic pedagogy gives us a vigorous way to do so: both expressive and social models of writing instruction want to produce better writers and, I venture to guess, better citizens. Photography, as I have described it in this dissertation, pulls writers deeply into both artistic and ethical reflection. What’s more, it does this by never settling, finally, on one side or the other, as art or as political object. Rather, the photograph’s inherent ambiguity of meaning, when actually searched out by artists and cultural critics alike, produces a rich, thick space of creativity and critical analysis. This space, which includes all the words, images, feelings, and theories available to us, is the space of rhetoric.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


