

Moments of Photography and the Absoluteness of Loss (Notes on Voice:Off)

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“I decided I liked photography *in opposition* to the cinema, from which I nonetheless failed to separate it.” —Roland Barthes

“The crude real will not by itself yield truth.” —Robert Bresson

HAIKU

Gerald Harvey, whose voice box has been taken out, composes an adventitious haiku in the notebook he carries with him:

“Horse meat”
“She has had food here”
“I took it”

He is outdoors with the artist Donigan Cumming. A moment earlier we saw the same man seated on a bed; speaking with a humming voice synthesizer the model read from letters between American Civil War generals Grant and Lee: “It is reported to me that there are wounded men . . . lying exposed and suffering. . .” Before that, video stills: clothed, sitting on a bed with a dog; the face in close up, eyes shut. And before that, naked, embraced by another old body, the man’s dark skin against Gerry’s translucent white, faces pressed together, the cinematographer Cumming circling them, struggling to capture a panoptic view of his waltzing subjects, stretching the document out into a space unachievable in still photographs.

The stark, rudimentary video lacks the cinematic poetic of Cumming’s still photographs. Already in these opening moments it is manic, fragmented, vacillating and desperate. To jarring effect, the awkward frozen time of inserted stills is paired against sped-up video that flies through a labyrinth of thin-walled assisted living apartments; photographs are obsessed over and discarded in fast-forward, voice-over transformed into unintelligible high-pitched babble. In this panicked montage, contrary forms of duration are set against one another; photographs long to move while the video camera dwells on still photographs in a visceral exploration of the antinomy between photography and cinema. The introductory haiku is a divisible index of situations. Fragments are strewn throughout the work. Time will be sculpted, cut-up, rearranged and put on trial. Cumming, in voice-over: “We wanted to start kind of at the beginning; we ended up starting at the end.”

CUTS

Hollis Frampton explains the work of the photographer in a memorable analogy: “A butcher,” he writes, “using only a knife, reduces a raw carcass to edible meat. He does not *make* the meat, because that was always in the carcass; he makes ‘cuts’ (dimensionless entities) that section flesh and separate it from the bone.” The work of the photographer, Frampton tells us, is to make “cuts” in time and space. These cuts, too, are dimensionless, in a sense; more accurately, they tarry in a duration that is imperceptible to our eye, that is, in fact, something outside our consciousness—is the revelation, in Walter Benjamin’s famous phrase, of an “optical unconscious”: “Whereas it is a commonplace,” Benjamin writes, “that, for example, we have some idea what is involved in the act of walking, if only in general terms, we have no idea at all what happens during the fraction of a second when a person *steps out*. Photography, with its devices of slow motion and enlargement, reveals the secret.” It is to the infinitesimal duration of the photographic exposure—to the logic of the cut—that we owe the revelations of Marey, Muybridge, and others and the rhetoric of the “decisive moment.”

The camera’s capacity to freeze time, the stasis of the photograph, is obscured in motion pictures through the processes of recording and projection. In the moving image of the cinema, an advancement which appeared some seventy years after the still photograph and which reproduces with far greater fidelity our own vision, our own experience, “everything which happens within the frame dies absolutely once this frame is passed beyond,” writes Roland Barthes. “When we define the photograph as a motionless image, this does not mean only that the figures it represents do not move; it means that they do not *emerge*, do not *leave*: they are anesthetized and fastened down, like butterflies.” The reactions of those who first viewed the Lumieres’ *actualités*

provide ample evidence of the cinema's terrific verisimilitude. Yet in the cinema, "the photograph, taken in flux, is impelled, ceaselessly drawn toward other views" and as such "it does not cling to me: it is not a *specter*."

ARREST

The photographer, in making cuts, hopes to extract certain instants from the ceaseless, ineluctable current of time, to arrest and preserve things that otherwise will never be seen again or which would not have been seen at all. When Robert Bresson, in his *Notes on the Cinematographer*, tells himself to "Make visible what, without you, might perhaps never have been seen," he gives voice to a fundamental photographic imperative, a conceit that we find in a thousand iterations: just as Walker Evans thought, when photographing, "there's a wonderful secret here and I can capture it. Only I can do it at this moment, only this moment and only me," Diane Arbus sensed that she, too, had "some slight corner on something about the quality of things": "I really believe," she said, "there are things which nobody would see unless I photographed them." And when Arbus photographed poverty, illness, and deformity in South Carolina "as well as Walker Evans," Studs Terkel told her: "You saw what Walker Evans saw." That we might see what they saw is the goal. The more the photographer wants to preserve, the more cuts must be made. The hyperproduction of Winogrand's final years in Los Angeles, during which developing and editing gave way entirely to compulsive recording, is the quintessential example.

According to a reflection by Proust, "a photograph acquires something of the dignity which it ordinarily lacks when it ceases to be a reproduction of reality and shows us things that no longer exist." The hope which we invest in the photographic act is precisely this antidote to the vicissitudes of time: that what is fleeting or perishable might remain with us forever, undiminished, if we are fortunate enough to photograph it. Barthes, in a morbid twist, speaks instead of "the return of the dead" and notes: "my attention is distracted from her by accessories which have perished; for clothing is perishable, it makes a second grave for the loved being."

THE POSE (DEATH)

For Barthes, "what founds the nature of photography is the pose. The physical duration of this pose is of little consequence. . . ." The pose transforms the nature of the subject. In being photographed, Barthes observes, "I constitute myself in the process of 'posing,' I transform myself in advance into an image. This transformation is an active one: I feel that the Photograph creates my body or mortifies it, according to its caprice." In this moment—a fleeting moment that accompanies the infinitesimal duration of the exposure—he is "neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter." Thus in the photographic pose—the pose that is not merely struck for a photograph but produced by the photograph, by the striking of the subject by the action of photography—we find an inversion of the sad spectacle of "death imitating life imitating death" that Caillois observed in the praying mantis which, after death, continues to carry on the actions of life, including the imitation of death. In the mortification of the photographic pose we find life imitating death imitating life.

In the photograph the subject is executed, but in death its beauty is preserved: that particular beauty which is not revealed by our gaze, no matter how long we look, but on the contrary emerges from—owes its existence to—instantaneity, to the reflex mechanical-chemical process of photography: "What no human eye is capable of catching, no pencil, brush, pen of pinning down," Bresson writes, "your camera catches without knowing what it is, and pins it down with a machine's scrupulous indifference."

MOMENTS OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Manic switch: now a towering voice demanding perverse poses, now directorial supplication. The pose is brought to our attention by the boisterous directions employed to produce it, an exploitative gesture that calls into question all acts of portraiture. The shadow of Donigan Cumming's work in still photography is cast upon the filmed situations in his videos when he shifts from cinematographer to director, breaking into a spasm of instructions for precise movement and expression, for the minutia of detail one normally observes only in photographs. These moments suggest an urge to make moving images still—to reproduce in life and subsequently record on video the mortification of gesture that is produced automatically by the still photograph. Imposing photographic vision onto the situation, Cumming violently evinces the tension between the natural and the staged that is endemic in the photographic portrait (Sayre), the tension Barthes feels as "a sensation of inauthenticity," when he finds that he is "neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object," when, posing, he finds himself in the process of "becoming a specter" (both spectre and corpse: he speaks at the same time of being "embalmed" by the gesture of the photographer).

In the photograph, it is the awkward gesture, the inarticulate pose, the product of an instant, that strikes us. Arbus, who was also compelled to record outcasts, cast-offs, and misfits ("because," she said, "they will have been so beautiful") speaks of capturing something "between gesture and repose." Lacking the dignified permanence of the subjects of early photographs, who were

required to remain still for relatively long exposures and who perhaps were not used to seeing themselves in pictures, the amateur, the ordinary person, in posing, inevitably fails: under the scrutiny of the camera one invariably becomes an Arbus subject, or, in Barthes's phrase, "a criminal type." In the cinematic continuum, on the other hand, "the pose is swept away and denied" (Barthes). With Cumming, video images are arranged into photographic moments or moments of photography. In his video portraits we are presented with the before and after of the photographic moment, the duration from which it is excerpted; instead of the still photographer's delicate "cuts," we are confronted with the carcass—whole, unwieldy, inelegant. His attempts to sculpt and form the gestures of those whose movements are hindered, spasmodic, blissfully uncontrollable extend the photographic gesture into the duration of the cinema—the duration of experience—but as the pose fails, the fleeting images become immobile, become photography. In his preference for models over actors—models whose performances are forced, awkward, sometimes ecstatic, other times expressionless—Cumming's approach is Bressonian: neither cinema nor photography, but "cinematography." Like Bresson's, his models are both acting and being: "divinely themselves," their performances glow with the aura of the photographic "that has been."

INSPECTION

In the attempt to see more, to save more, the move from still to moving image proves useless. In reducing video to photographic moments, motion pictures to stills, it would seem that the possibility of scrutiny returns. The photograph shows us a great deal—we notice in photographs much more than we can see when we look with our eyes—and in arresting an image, seizing it from the baffling flux, it might become as legible as a picture (we are told that Arbus "often invited people to her apartment in order to 'scrutinize them'"; she also liked to photograph the blind: unable to return the gaze, like the medicated and mentally ill, they can be scrutinised freely—in the flesh as in a photograph). But the photograph does not give itself up to scrutiny for long. "If you look at something long enough," Warhol said, "I've discovered that the meaning goes away." This observation makes plain the impossibility of finding what we are looking for in pictures.

In *Voice: Off*, we see a photographer panicked by the limits of photographic duration, with photographs as silent crypts that keep their secrets. The intractable reality of the "that has been" has been banished to the basement of his house, where a forlorn exploration of family photographs that could only be transformed by the "drawer or the wastebasket" (Barthes) takes place. Jumbling personal histories, he retrieves and studies the photographs and casts his models in a failed resurrection. There is a mystery to be solved. Gerry will play the part of Cumming's estranged brother, taken away from the family at a young age for fear that growing up with a mentally ill brother would spoil the carefree childhoods of him and his siblings. Time will be carved up, rearranged, with attempts at stasis: "We wanted to start kind of at the beginning; we ended up starting at the end." Running up and down the stairs of his house, withdrawing to the second-floor space of solitude and contemplation and then racing downstairs to an archive of images in the basement—the site of roots, dirt, and dreams (Bachelard)—confronted with the meagre results of photographic cutting, Cumming is faced not only with the impossibility of coming to conclusions ("You can't put anything to it," he says) but the uselessness of such conclusions were they attainable. This shambles represents a double failure in the photographic impulse: first, the failure of the act, the vain attempt to record everything, from all angles, at every moment; second, the failure of the fantasy, the hopelessness, if such a document could be produced, of drawing from it what one wanted. In the same way, the cinematographer and his models dwell on the irreparable errors and contingencies of the past: old slippers that may have caused the old woman's fall; the father's fall "while Julian was watching him."

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In a climactic sequence, Cumming goes in search of a cigarette burn left by his dead model Albert: the "burn that Albert made when he collapsed on his sofa with his lit cigarette"—a burn made by the cigarette that fell from his hand or mouth after death, a spirit stain, a humble death shadow leaving a modest mark. Three video stills show the burn mark, three different views; by counting the tiles it is possible to locate it in the apartment. Cumming presents the stills to an old woman, explaining the objective and the method. (The contrast between them is striking: her resignation—"that's all gone in the garbage," "I don't know if we're allowed in," "they would stop us from going in," and "if they rip up the tiles it's too late"—and his agency, the privilege of the socially adept, the able, the powerful—"Who's down there and gonna stop us?" and "Let's get down there before they do it.") Six years after the fatal heart attack, Cumming locates the burn and places the prints on the floor, representations pinwheeling around the original mark, the latter's imminent erasure signalled by the deafening noise of jackhammers, building renovations closing in on all that remains of a man who stepped lightly on the earth.

The urge to locate the burn is the same one that motivates the photographer to make cuts: the veneration of the index, the trace, and the desperate desire to preserve it. "The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent," writes Barthes. "From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant." (This the pathos of the erased faces in Bellocq's photographs of prostitutes in New Orleans: the erasure is an interruption in the present, that is always present.) The spell of the trace motivates the desperate search for answers within the image. For Barthes, this trace is alchemical: "If photography belonged to a world with some residual sensitivity to myth, we should exult over the richness of the symbol: the loved body is immortalized by the mediation of a precious metal, silver . . . to

which we might add the notion that this metal, like all the metals of Alchemy, is alive.” Inferring the same connection between reproductive technologies and the supernatural, Bresson gives the process another name: “DIVINATION—how can one not associate that name with the two sublime machines I use for my work? Camera and tape recorder carry me far away from the intelligence which complicates everything.”

“I took it”

“She has bad food here”

“Horse meat”

“We wanted to start kind of at the beginning; we ended up starting at the end.”

Cinema shows us something that corresponds to our own experience of time and space, and appears to us as unnatural only when stopped, sped up, or reversed. Still photographs neither reproduce our usual experience of time nor extend it: they stop it dead, showing us precisely what we *do not* see. In the stutters and hesitations of Bressonian cinematography, we see photographs emerging from the flux of images.

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