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It's the Funerals I Missed which Haunt Me the Most

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Abstract

What makes a photograph great? This is the central question which guides my research, and I answer this question in two parts. The first element is the structure of the photograph, which Robert Adams addresses in his collection of essays, *Beauty in Photography: Essays in Defense of Traditional Values*. With the guiding principle that structure can provide harmony in an image, I develop a collection of guidelines for composing images and name them the "Rules of Clarity." The purpose of these rules is to help photographers create harmonious compositions, free from distractions. When a photograph has few distractions, it becomes easy to read. To show this, I break down my photograph *Dick O'Bryan* (2014) and explain that when there are no distractions, a viewer can develop a relationship with the content. The content leads into the second element which makes a great photograph, which is the "punctum" of the image. Following ideas developed in Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, I analyze the role of the punctum and use this idea to write about why I am drawn to photographs of people who are now deceased. A photograph of a dead person is a proof of existence, but also a reference to the passing of time. A photograph becomes a prophesy of death. For my capstone project, I make photographs for this limbo. I create obituary photographs, which are made while my subjects are alive but for when they are dead.

Photography has a problem: the photograph is tied to the referent—the thing being photographed. But without the referent, there is no photograph. So how do we separate the thing from the photograph of the thing? Since photography is an art form worthy of critique, discussion, and analysis, we have to be able judge the photograph separately from the referent, though this is very difficult. Robert Adams's *Burning Oil Sludge, North of Denver, Colorado* (1973-1974) (Figure I) is a photograph of a landscape marred by burning oil. Discussion is largely based around the content, and most often, viewers don't ask questions about why Adams frames it *this particular way*. But to discuss the photograph, we must judge photographer's choices rather than the content of the photograph. Since we can't look at the content and apply that judgement to the whole photo, the real question is "what defines a great photograph?" To answer this question, I bring together two ideas which create my definition of great photographs.

Figure I. Robert Adams, *Burning Oil Sludge, North of Denver, Colorado*. 1973-1974. Silver Gelatin Photograph.

The first of these ideas relates to the structure. In his collection of essays, *Beauty in Photography: Essays in Defense of Traditional Values*, Robert Adams asserts that the structure, the composition of the photograph, gives the picture its quality.[1] Structure equals composition, and over the years, I've learned countless rules which I use to structure my images: don't create tangents, don't have anything coming out of someone's head, make the brightest part of the image the most important, don't have out-of-focus objects in the foreground, don't include words in your image, keep your lines straight, create contrast between subject and background, balance your composition, etc. I will refer to this list as The Rules of Clarity, and these rules never end. The Rules of Clarity have one major purpose: to prevent distraction from the subject of the image. Structure should be in service to the content, and composition should be invisible.

Figure II. Arno Goetz, *John Frost*. 2014. Photograph.

The Rules of Clarity produce harmony. When we know what to look at, our eyes appreciate it more. Figure II does not follow the Rules of Clarity, and there is a noticeable lack of harmony. The line going through the top of the subject's head pulls our eye up to the pointy wood and down to the left side of the frame, where the bright highlight of the wood catches our attention. Our brain wants to look at his face, but our eye wants to look at the wood, so the two elements battle for our focus. This fight for our attention does not create a happy viewing experience. There are many distractions in

[1] Adams, Robert. 1981. *Beauty in Photography: Essays in Defense of Traditional Values.* New York: Aperture. 24.

this image, and this lack of clarity hurts the photograph. But when a photograph does follow the rules of clarity, the difference is palpable. Well-structured photographs feel like a breath of fresh air.

My portrait of Dick O'Bryan (Figure III) closely follows the Rules of Clarity. The light draws our focus to his head and eyes, and there is space around the subject's head, which allows him to breathe. There is separation between subject and background, and there are catchlights in his eyes. In an image like this, every decision produces clarity. If the image is well-composed, the eye knows where to look, and the photograph is easy to read. Photographers are masters of direction, and when there is nothing distracting viewers from the subject, we easily focus on the main subject. We can take our time with the photograph and read what is underneath. We can read the subject, get to know him—we can fall in love with him.

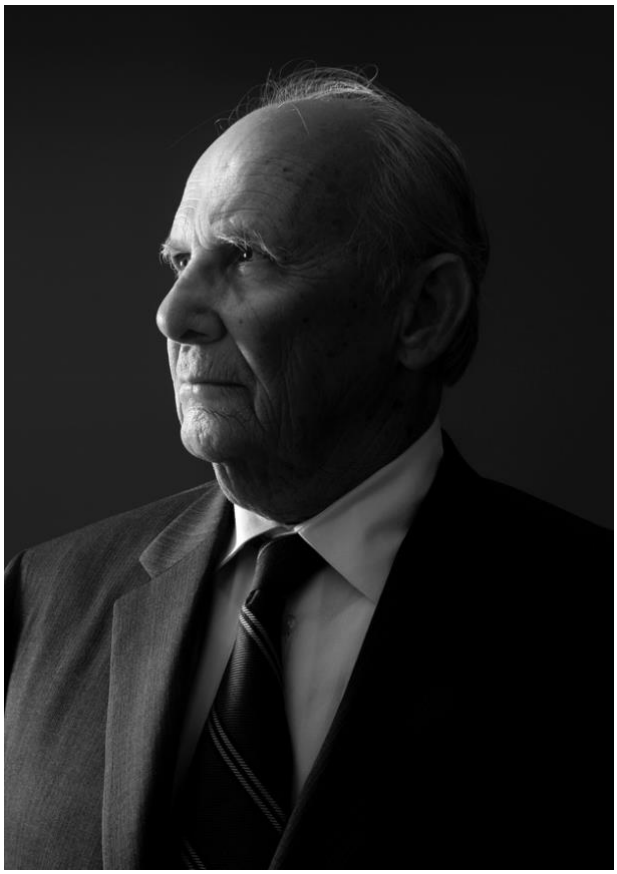

Figure III. Arno Goetz, *Dick O'Bryan*. 2014. Photograph.

Content brings us to the second element which makes great photographs, which is the "punctum." For his book, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography,* Roland Barthes steals the word "punctum" from anatomy, and uses the word to describe having an emotional response to a photograph. The punctum is the opening of your tear duct, but Barthes uses this word to describe our attachment to photographs. Roland describes the punctum as "that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)."[2] It is felt in the heart. Barthes describes the punctum in physical terms. When you connect with a photograph strongly enough, you feel it in your heart. Without a punctum, the viewer might have a general interest, but no personal connection to the image.

Often, when Barthes saw a photograph in the newspaper, his interest was in the world, but not the photograph itself.[3] Without a soul, photographs are just pictures of things, and we are not invested in just things. The things are just the referents, and they are no more interesting than the things in front of us right now. A water bottle is a water bottle until a photograph transforms the bottle into something more than itself. With a punctum, the water bottle can transcend its thingness and hold the viewer captive. The nugget holds a message, a memory, a surprise that is specific to each viewer. There is no great photograph until a viewer feels it is so. The punctum makes the image sing.

Since punctums are intensely subjective, their meanings can morph over time, like in my portrait of Dick (Figure III). Dick began as my shoe salesman, and as silly as that seems, it is the truth. He worked at Culwell and Son, a Dallas clothing store which sells suits, casual wear, and school uniforms. I'd already been friendly with Dick for years, but in 2014, I asked him if he

[2] Barthes, Roland. 1981. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang. 27.
[3] Barthes, *Camera Lucida.* 26.

would sit for a portrait. This portrait was the beginning of a great friendship, and over the years, he became like a grandfather to me. For a long time, the portrait represented our relationship, from near-strangers to good friends. But recently, this photograph came to represent something different. While in the process of writing my thesis, Dick died.

Now this photograph—every photograph of him—represents something new. The photograph holds him in a perpetual state of living, but yet he is dead. When Roland Barthes found a photograph of his mother as a child, he shares similar thoughts; "I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder, like Winnicott's psychotic patient, *over a catastrophe which has already occurred*. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe."[4] Because I photographed him, Dick is in a strange limbo of always being alive and always being dead. Barthes writes "This *punctum*... is vividly legible in historical photographs: there is always a defeat of Time in them: *that* is dead and *that* is going to die…. [They] have their whole lives before them; but also they are dead (today), they are then *already* dead (yesterday)."[5] To quote Susan Sontag, "All photographs are *memento mori*."[6] The photograph of Dick is a guarantee of existence, but now it is also a prophesy of his death.

Photographer Chris Killip's also did not set out to photograph death, but death became a by-product in his documentary project, *Skinningrove,* named after the small British town where he photographed. When this area lost its iron smelting industry, the town had to transition from a factory town to a fishing town. In this transition, people drowned. Fishing was not in their blood. Two years after Killip made the photograph, *David and "Whippet" Waiting for Salmon to Swim the Stream, Skinningrove, North Yorkshire* (1983), David died. Killip says, "You don't know

4 Barthes, *Camera Lucida.* 96.
5 Ibid, 96.
6 Sontag, Susan, 1977. *On Photography.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 15.

what's going to happen, and for better or worse, a photograph is a chronicle of a death foretold. It's the one thing about everybody that you do know. They are going to die."[7] The photograph, *Simon Being Taken Out to Sea for the First Time Since his Father Drowned, Skinningrove* (1983) (Figure IV), is also a powerful image of death, but in this image, Killip photographs a person who is left behind, a survivor. Obituaries say that the deceased are "survived by…," which implies a victory over trauma. In the boy's face, I see this trauma. And while this photograph invites questions about why Simon is taken out to sea, it is also a powerful image of a boy trying to understand the loss of his father, while being confronted by the very thing which killed him. This image holds immense power over me; this punctum really does wound me.

Figure IV. Chris Killip, *Simon Being Taken Out to Sea for the First Time Since his Father Drowned, Skinningrove*. 1983. Photograph.

[7] Hubber, Laura. "Caught in the Act: A Conversation with Photographer Chris Killip." *The Getty Iris* (blog), July 7, 2017. https://blogs.getty.edu/iris/caught-in-the-act-a-conversation-with-photographer-chris-killip/.

In 2016, my maternal grandmother developed dementia. When we moved her into a facilitated living home, I made photographs of her on my cellphone, and while those photographs were not "great," they had value to me because of the content. Photographs for photo albums are rarely eloquently composed, and this is understandable. Often, these photographs are made for the punctum: to remember a birthday, a birth, or in this case, an expected death. A few months later, on the last day I saw her, I photographed her in bed, knowing this would be the last photograph I made of her (Figure V). Later, when she died, my mother asked me if I had any photographs for her obituary. I did not, and that failure haunts me.

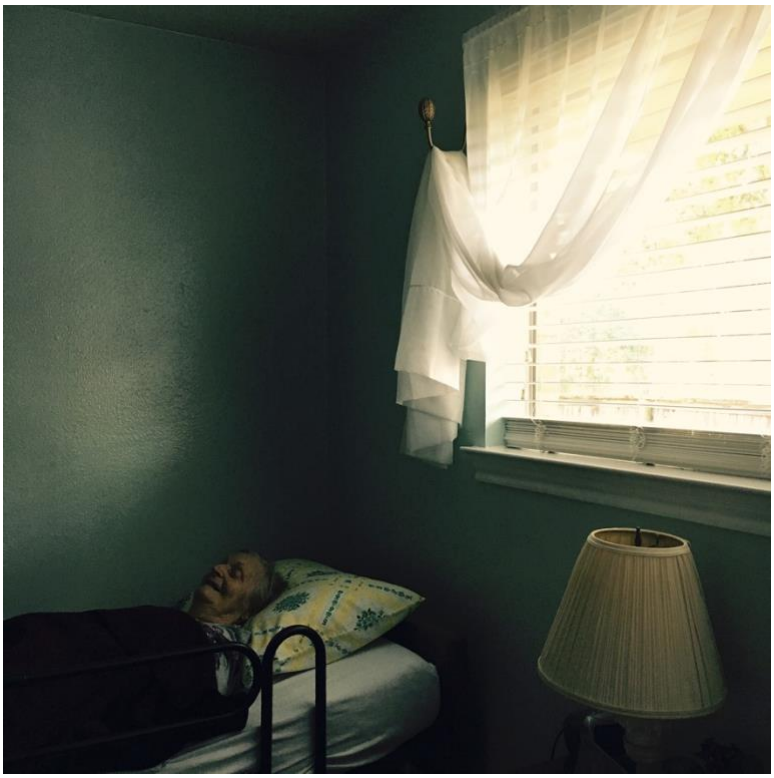

Figure V. Arno Goetz, *Rose*, *Fall*. 2016. Photograph.

Perhaps this is why my capstone project takes the form of obituary photographs. They are a sort of apology—or a begging for forgiveness. In my series, *In Memoriam*, my photographs only exist because my subjects will die, and these images will outlive my sitters. Figures VI and

VII are images which freeze time and memory; they are made *while* my subjects are alive—but made *for* when they are dead. I am photographing for both life and death, and the soft edges and dreamy blur allude to this limbo, as if the photographs themselves are confused. After creation, the photographs are presented to the public, but the work will not be complete until my subjects are actually dead. These are obituary photographs, and their purpose will not be fulfilled until the images are printed in the obituary section of a newspaper. In black and white, and with funeral information below, the photographs will be in their final forms.

Figure VI. Arno Goetz, *Lily Hyon*. 2020. Photograph.

Figure VII. Arno Goetz, *Buzz Spector*. 2020. Photograph.

A photograph is a guarantee of existence. While photographs can misrepresent the narrative, the things being photographed had to exist. Barthes says, "What I see is not a memory, an imagination, a reconstitution…, but reality in a past state: at once the past and the real."[8]

[8] Barthes, *Camera Lucida.* 84.

Because light creates photographs and also allows us to see, photographs—like sight—give witness to what is real. “The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star.”[9] There is a certainty that the things which have been photographed existed in life. This undeniability pulls me to photographs of those who are now deceased. In a single photograph, there is proof of life and death.

About this power, I find a parallel in Allison Benis White’s poetry collection, *Please Bury Me in This,* a dizzying attempt to understand her sister’s suicide. White mourns, and she has made peace with this reality. Her poetry does not wail to the heavens, cursing God and asking why bad things happen to good people. Instead, White writes about the beauty and sadness of her understanding. It is with this same duality that she understands the power of the suicide note which gives the book its title. White writes “Pinned to a dress in Julia’s closet, the note said, *Please bury me in this*.”[10] Skipping a few lines, White continues; “What strikes me more than anything is the thoughtfulness of the note. / Her certainty about what words would become (what she’d wear forever).”[11] White’s understanding of that finality is powerful. There can be no opposing side. There is a matter of fact-ness about this line but also a sadness, an understanding of futility which gives White’s *Please Bury Me in This* its incorruptible power. This understanding exists in photographs, too. The photograph has been made, and there is no return. Dick had to exist, and now he has to be dead.

[9] Barthes, 80-81.
[10] White, Allison Benis. 2017. *Please Bury Me in This.* New York: Four Way Books. 45
[11] White, 45.

Image List

Figure I: Robert Adams, *Burning Oil Sludge, North of Denver, Colorado*. 1973-1974. Silver Gelatin Photograph, 15.2 x 19.4 cm.

Figure II. Arno Goetz, *John Frost*. 2014. Photograph, size variable.

Figure III. Arno Goetz, *Dick O'Bryan*. 2014. Photograph, size variable.

Figure IV. Chris Killip, *Simon Being Taken Out to Sea for the First Time Since his Father Drowned, Skinningrove,* 1983. Photograph, 402 x 516mm.

Figure V. Arno Goetz, *Rose*, *Fall*. 2016. Photograph, size variable.

Figure VI. Arno Goetz, *Lily Hyon*. 2020. Photograph, size variable.

Figure VII. Arno Goetz, *Buzz Spector*. 2020. Photograph, size variable.

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