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Studium and Punctum: The Duality of Photography

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Studium and Punctum: The Duality of Photography

What defines greatness? What element can change something from being mildly interesting to extraordinary? Details, emotion, back-story, and message can all add to the power of a photo, but these are all reasonable answers to define something unreasonable. Recognizing something powerful is instinctive, which makes it hard to define. Barthes gives some guidance to this process by separating the vaguely interesting from the piercingly wonderful. Through studium and punctum, images are separated into these categories, allowing the viewer to analyze images with acute precision. What makes this interesting? Why do I care? These questions are slowly answered by looking deeply into what interests you as a person and figuring out why.

The starting point for this process is defining what studium and punctum mean. Barthes stated that studium is “enthusiastic commitment” for a photo (146). The viewer takes part in the photo and enjoys it, but not to a deeper level. It provides something for the observer to connect to, but does not draw them in more than that. Studium photos reflect general interests, likes or dislikes, of a person. Because of this, what is studium for one is not for the next. It is highly subjective and is dependent on the viewer’s opinion. My likes and interests tend towards music and art, so the perfect photographic subject for me was dance. Dance and music are closely associated, dance being the physical manifestation of music. There is drama inherently involved in dance, which lends itself well to photos.

The drama of dance is shown in the studium photo of a ballerina in black and white, “Dance (1)”. Since the image is so simplistic, it lacks details for the eye to latch onto making it flat. This tendency is counteracted with the abundant amount of energy in the dancer. There are contradictory elements that make the dancer’s shape intriguing. From the waist down it is a typical ballerina photo, the legs straight and perfectly on point, a tutu juts out from the girl’s tiny body, everything is crisp clear lines. The waist up brings drama and recklessness. The girl’s arms are lazily strewn about and her neck extended backwards, flinging hair wildly behind her. The chaos and careless nature of the top half her body is balanced well by its ordered counter-part below. The heavy fan of hair even mirrors the volume of the tutu worn by the dancer. All these elements together create an eye-catching photo that sparks my interest.

Although all these details create a good composition, they have no more substance than that. The viewer is not left reflecting on the photo. The understanding of the photo only requires one glance and no further contemplation. The photo is absorbed so quickly that there is nothing left to question. The more chaotic movement in the photo is contrary to that normally done by a ballerina, but it is not strange in enough to require further inquiry. Overall, the simplistic concept of the photo makes it only an interest, but not a passion, only studium.

The difference between interest and passion is comparable to the difference between studium and punctum. Punctum is something that “pierces” and “wounds” the observer (Barthes 146). There is an unexpected intrigue in that draws the viewer in. The photo is personified and punches out towards the viewer demanding attention. The power of the photo does not rely on the viewer’s interest of its subject because the image is so powerful that it can stand on its own. Punctum does not have to have an obvious source; small details can make all the difference in its power. It marks the observer, changing something within them. Also the photo itself changes

when the experiences of the observer are applied to it. There is a give and take relationship between viewer and object, making what is a dead moment alive and vivid again. Barthes sees this as the theatrical characteristic of photography, comparing it to an actor who is in a “body simultaneously living and dead,” (148). Photographs are moments suspended in time, but ultimately dead moments that only receive life again in the mind of the observer. Theatre and photography both attempt to portray life, a very difficult task, but when it achieves some of that goal it is its most powerful.

The photo that pierced me was that of Martha Graham called *Letter to the World* or *The Kick* (Morgan 125). The photo contains opposite elements that together create a fluid and elegant image. The black, blurry background allows the eye to focus up Graham’s crisp gray and white figure. The sweep of fabric orchestrated by Graham creates energy within the photo, making a dramatic motion that grabs the viewer’s attention. The wide and billowing shape is contradicted by Graham’s miniscule upper body, which juts erectly out towards the left edge of the photo. Her right arm following the length of her side shows strength with its rigid structure, while the left arm seems to cling to her head for support. There is a subtle juxtaposition between strength and fluidity that creates intrigue before even acknowledging the emotion of the face.

The emotion contained on Graham’s face completes the impact of the image. There is a mixture of serenity and sorrow on her face (sorrow aided by the hand placed on her forehead). The face creates its own moment within the photo and is refined and understated compared to the elegant drama produced by the body. Disappointment and sorrow can be read from her downward gaze and her slight frown. Her face also contains a feeling of peace because of her heavily lidded eye, drawing closer and closer into a deep sleep. The sleep-like state of her face

lends itself to the falling motion of the body. The themes of sadness, serenity, and strength within the photo leave the viewer to question why all these elements have come together.

The strangely beautiful movement captured in this image was Graham's forte. Her style has had a huge influence on the world of dance, Graham being the creator of what is modern dance today. It was her goal to create honest movements that produced drama. This photo recreated the movement in Graham's contemporary dance piece *Letter to the World*, which was based upon the Emily Dickinson poem of the same title. "This is my letter to the world/that never wrote to me," (527) is the opening line of the poem, showing a longing to participate in the world, but then being denied. These words influence the image, making it appear lonesome, but there a definite strength to the image that separates it from the poem. The picture is its own creation to be admired, even though the viewer may not know why they admire it.

The difference between these two photos is their ability to make what is staged seem lifelike. The studium image achieves has a unique quality of not being the typical ballerina, but it does not go far enough. It leaves the viewer with no questions, so it is enjoyed but not reflected upon. The punctum photo creates an interesting shape and story, enticing the viewer to question what they see. The body is staged, but seems natural and the emotion on the face finishes the photograph's powerful statement. The punctum photo is more successful in creating a livable moment that touches the viewer. The theatre of photography comes alive in this photo and reaches out to its audience, demanding its attention. It becomes more than "a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead," but a moment the viewer is invited to take part of, making it all the more enticing (Barthes 150).

The strong connection between viewer and photo is the true mark of a powerful photo. Photographs can provide alternate viewpoints and cultural experiences that would normally not be encountered. These portals connect people and cultures, suggest alternative lives. Much can be learned from a photograph, but much can be added through the observer's personal experiences relating to the photo. This creates a mutual sharing experience, a unique and important aspect. The "marks" and "bruises" left behind are manifestations of the power of life that is caught in a photograph (Barthes 147).

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Interpretive Essay Assignment

2000-2500 words in length, excluding footnotes and bibliography.

What does your chosen photograph mean? (This is NOT what the photograph signifies to you personally. This is what can be made clear through reasoned argumentation to a group of people by an informed viewer: YOU.)

You must describe your image early on in your essay; this could include subject matter, subject, compositional form, denotations and connotations, internal, original and external context. Do not describe everything. Describe what you see as essential to help us get an overview of the image and describe what you see as relevant in making your argument. **The stronger the ties are to what is indisputably visible in your image, the stronger will be your argument.** Do not assume that we see what you see or that our connotations are the same as yours.

Include a copy of your image in an appendix.*

Your audience: college-level readers interested in art but not experts in the field. Suggested: Use subheads, with topic words or phrases, as you will often see in magazine articles. This is not MLA style but it will help you stay on track and will aide your reader in understanding the architecture of your argument.

Do not use evaluative language. It is not your job to convince us that this image is good or bad. Assume these readers already know that the photograph under examination has something to teach us. You are their expert guide because you have spent a long time with the photograph and you have researched the image and its maker. We don't want to learn about you. We want to learn about the photograph.

All citation should be in MLA format. You citations should be annotated.

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