

# MERLEAU-PONTY AND BARTHES ON IMAGE CONSCIOUSNESS: Probing the (Im)possibility of Meaning

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For both Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Roland Barthes, images are not merely objects in space; they belong to the realm of the metaphysical. Paintings “move” us, according to Merleau-Ponty: their “quality, light, color, depth [...] awaken an echo in our bod[y] and [...] our body welcomes them.”<sup>1</sup> To encounter a painting is to apprehend it through one’s body. We constitute “brute meaning” by drawing upon the “fabric of the world” in which our bodies are inextricably caught.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, for Barthes, poignant photographs “wound” us: they contain an “element [the *punctum*] that rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces” us.<sup>3</sup> Unlike Merleau-Ponty, Barthes believes that pictures resist meaning-making. They provoke an “internal agitation,” an “animation” in the viewer. Yet this “*affect*” cannot wholly be reduced or explained.<sup>4</sup> Hence, I think the crux of Merleau-Ponty’s and Barthes’ disagreement about the ontology of image consciousness has to do with the possibility of meaning-making (or lack thereof). While Merleau-Ponty believes that a painting can be meaningful and express the essential “indivisible whole[ness]” and “imperious

1 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Galen Johnson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1993), 125.

2 *Ibid.*, 123.

3 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 26.

4 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 19-20.

unity” of the world,<sup>5</sup> Barthes contends that “since every photograph is contingent (and thereby outside of meaning), photography cannot signify (aim at a generality) except by assuming a mask.”<sup>6</sup> In this paper, I outline Barthes’ critique of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of painting—and his phenomenology more generally—and propose how we might explain the two philosophers’ disagreements on the subject.

For Merleau-Ponty, paintings do more than just depict the world: they “attempt” to become “a piece of nature.”<sup>7</sup> Phenomenology, the philosophical current Merleau-Ponty belonged to, posits that as humans, we are embodied subjects living in the world, which we experience through our sensations (our perception). One’s body is not merely “a chunk of space or a bundle of functions” distinct from one’s consciousness; rather, one’s body *is* one’s consciousness.<sup>8</sup> The soul “thinks according to the body, not according to itself” because the body is what grounds all cognition. It is the “degree zero of spatiality” from which I see the world around me.<sup>9</sup> In other words, it is impossible to understand the world “from the exterior” because I am “immersed” in it; I live it “from the inside.”<sup>10</sup> The meaning that I give to the world is thus fundamentally informed by how I perceive it through my body. Paintings, Merleau-Ponty contends, are the repositories of the meaning given to the painter through her vision and movement. The painter’s eye “is an instrument that moves itself, a means which invents its own ends; it is *that which* has been moved by some impact of the world, which it then restores to the visible through the traces of a hand.”<sup>11</sup> For this reason, when we view a landscape painting by Paul Cézanne, we see how Cézanne translated onto the canvas the sensations that he experienced when he laid eyes on a particular landscape.<sup>12</sup> Cézanne’s body was moved by the landscape that his eyes perceived, and this movement was transformed into the movement of his hands painting the landscape onto the canvas.<sup>13</sup> As viewers, we see the painted landscape and are ourselves moved by it. Thereby we imbue the painting with our own meaning(s). Thus, the painting allows us not only to see as Cézanne saw, but also to impart on it the countless other meanings that we may choose to give to it.

For Merleau-Ponty, paintings are indeed inherently and endlessly meaningful. A person unfamiliar with the work of Vincent van Gogh might look at his painting *Wheatfield with Crows* (figure 1) and simply see a bright ochre wheat field under an inky blue sky. Individuals who know that this was (supposedly) the last painting van Gogh completed before committing suicide will likely add an extra layer of meaning

5 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Galen Johnson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1993), 65.

6 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 34.

7 Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” 62.

8 Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 124.

9 *Ibid.*, 138.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*, 127.

12 Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” 63.

13 *Ibid.*

onto this first interpretation: they may see the artwork as an evocation of death (symbolized by the dark sky) looming over and encroaching upon life (symbolized by the vibrant wheat field). Alternatively, an art historian might look at this painting and instead understand it through the lens of Western art historical scholarship: she might take the flatness of the pictorial elements and the visibility of the brushstrokes as evidence that van Gogh's art foreshadowed modernism. A person who grew up on a farm and spent his childhood ploughing wheat fields may, upon viewing *Wheatfield with Crows*, be flooded with memories of his early years (such memories may include the first time his father showed him how to mount a horse, or the memory of running around the fields with his friends, or of how the fields smelled after the first snowfall). In each of these cases, individuals bestow onto van Gogh's painting meaning(s) that are informed by—but not limited to—her personal lived experience. Giving meaning(s) to a painting, Merleau-Ponty argues, is an infinite act of interpretation: it is a hermeneutic.<sup>14</sup> It is interpersonal and timeless; in fact, one person may give *Wheatfield with Crows* multiple different layers of meaning at different moments in her life. This shows that the process of meaning-making is never sterile nor static, but, instead, rich, fertile, and bound to never be fully complete.<sup>15</sup>

Barthes' account of meaning-making in photographs is markedly different. Much like Merleau-Ponty, Barthes thinks that pictures have the ability to "move" us (to borrow Merleau-Ponty's language): they provoke a "pathos," an "affect" in the "Spectator [the viewer]."<sup>16</sup> He pinpoints the source of affect as a detail he calls the "*punctum*," which is present in every "attractive" photograph.<sup>17</sup> On a mission to "formulate the fundamental feature, the universal without which there would be no Photography," Barthes employs a "cynical phenomenology"<sup>18</sup> in his analysis of photographs, which ultimately leads him to the conclusion that every compelling photo contains both a "*studium*" and a "*punctum*."<sup>19</sup> The *studium*, Barthes posits, consists in "a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment [...] without special acuity" that every photograph possesses.<sup>20</sup> Meaning "study" in Latin, *studium* designates both a vague disinterest in the consumption of certain cultural products and a "kind of education" that allows one "to encounter the photographer's intentions, to enter into harmony with them, to disapprove of them, but always to understand them, to argue them within myself for culture (from which the *studium* derives) is a contract arrived at between creators and consumers."<sup>21</sup> The photographer ("Operator") communicates her intended meaning by using visual codes that are universal and can thus be deciphered by Spectators.<sup>22</sup> Barthes uses William Klein's photo, "Mayday, 1959," as an example. In this picture,

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14 Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 149.

15 Ibid.

16 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 21.

17 Ibid., 27.

18 Ibid., 9.

19 Ibid., 26.

20 Ibid.

21 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 27-28.

22 Ibid., 28.

the *studium* would be the fact that I can make sense of the subject of the photo, and that I can learn certain ethnographical and historical details by examining it.<sup>23</sup> I can discern a black and white photograph of an old woman with a suspicious glance, who is surrounded by a few men of different ages. I notice that one boy is wearing a blazer, that another has a youthful haircut, and that the old woman is wearing a scarf around her head, for instance. The photograph “teaches me how Russians dress” in Moscow in 1959.<sup>24</sup> In other words, I recognize this picture as a “good [coherent and identifiable] historical scene.”<sup>25</sup>

However, without searching for it, there is an “element” in this photograph that “rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me.”<sup>26</sup> Barthes names this element the *punctum* and defines it as “that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).”<sup>27</sup> He claims that the *punctum* is usually a small detail that was not strictly intended by the Operator. Its “wounding” quality cannot be analyzed or studied, but is instead “given right there on the page” and resonates with the Spectator.<sup>28</sup> Barthes seems to imply that a photograph’s *punctum* may differ from one Spectator to another when he says that “to give examples of *punctum* is, in a certain fashion, to *give myself up*.”<sup>29</sup> If we accept this and grant that a *punctum* is subjective, then we may posit that what “wounds” an individual depends on that individual’s past lived experiences. Nevertheless, if one tests this out phenomenologically, one quickly finds that what wounds someone does not always directly map onto that person’s past memories, and thus cannot be easily explained. For example, in James van der Zee’s “Family Portrait” (figure 3), Barthes identifies the *punctum* as the “belt worn low” by, and the “strapped pumps”<sup>30</sup> of, the woman standing behind the chair. Barthes is baffled by the fact that this detail strikes him: “(Mary Janes – why does this dated fashion touch me? I mean: to what date does it refer me?).”<sup>31</sup> Personally, when I look at this picture, the detail I identify as the *punctum* is the seated woman’s right hand. When I try to understand why this element in particular “pricks” me, I can only say that the way in which the hand curves awkwardly over the armrest, and how one finger seems abnormally long, makes me uncomfortable, or “creeps me out.” This, however, is not a satisfying answer. What *exactly* bothers me about this woman’s hand? Why do the strapped pumps arouse “great sympathy [and] almost a kind of tenderness” in Barthes?<sup>32</sup>

23 Ibid., 30.

24 Ibid., 30.

25 Ibid., 26.

26 Ibid.

27 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 26.

28 Ibid., 43.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 43

The *punctum* significantly impacts one's understanding of the photograph: it "lashe[s]" the order and facile meaning of the *studium* and "changes my reading [of the photograph]", "mark[ing] [it] in my eyes with a higher value."<sup>33</sup> Ever since the woman's right hand in James van der Zee's "Family Portrait" "punctured" me, the only thing I can see when I look at that photograph is that gnarled hand. As Barthes succinctly puts it, the *punctum* suddenly—and paradoxically—"while remaining a 'detail,' fills the whole picture."<sup>34</sup> Yet, as Barthes asks, why is this the case? Why must I disturb the "unity of composition" that was found in the *studium* that constituted "Family Portrait" before the *punctum* wounded me?<sup>35</sup> After all, "whether or not [the *punctum*] is triggered, it is an addition. It is what I add to the photograph and what is nonetheless already there."<sup>36</sup> Why must this addition—this newfound *meaning* I give to "Family Portrait"—be made? Why must the facile meaning of its *studium* (which allows me to understand the picture in historical/ethnographical terms, as a family portrait of an African American family living in Harlem in 1926) be supplanted by the deeply disturbing and incomplete meaning engendered by the *punctum*, which reduces the entire photograph to the creepy hand? Moreover, why do I choose to impart meaning to something that seems irreducible, that seems to resist it?<sup>37</sup> I continue to ask: *why* do I think the woman's hand is creepy? If this persistent uncertainty tells me anything, it is that "the incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance."<sup>38</sup>

Attempting to answer these questions, Barthes draws on certain notions of psychoanalytic theory. He introduces the concept of *heimlich*<sup>39</sup> (German for "familiar," "native," "belonging to the home"), which closely relates to its opposite notion, *unheimlich* (German for "uncanny"), an idea that is discussed in Freud's essay, "The Uncanny."<sup>40</sup> Freud defines "the uncanny" as "an experience of tension" that belongs to "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar."<sup>41</sup> Freud uses "the double" as an example of the uncanny: having connections with "reflections in mirrors, with shadows, spirits, with the belief in the soul and the fear of death," seeing one's *doppelgänger* (for instance, when I look at a picture of myself or catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror) "arouses dread and creeping horror."<sup>42</sup> Though uncanny situations occur in real life, Freud argues that the uncanny is also "an aesthetic category": the feeling can emerge when we consume literature, songs, movies, and other art forms.<sup>43</sup> Personally, one of the first

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33 Ibid., 42.

34 Ibid., 45.

35 Ibid., 41.

36 Ibid., 55.

37 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 21.

38 Ibid., 51.

39 Ibid., 40.

40 Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," 2, accessed 2 December 2017, <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>.

41 Freud, "The Uncanny," 2.

42 Ibid., 10.

43 Ibid., 2.

artworks that comes to mind when I think of the uncanny is Lars von Trier's film *Breaking the Waves* (1996) (figure 4), which tells the story of Bess, an unusual woman who is in love with her husband Jan, an oil rig worker who asks her to have sex with other men after he is gravely injured in a work accident. It is a dark, tragic story of sexual debasement, religious paranoia and death. These are certainly disturbing themes, but I do not know exactly why *Breaking the Waves* disturbs me more than most horror movies, which deal with similarly frightening topics such as murder, torture, and ghosts. This inability to explain fully my uneasiness or to give meaning to my experience is precisely what constitutes the uncanny, according to Freud: "We, with the superiority of rational minds, are able to detect the sober truth; and yet this knowledge does not lessen the impression of uncanniness in the least degree."<sup>44</sup>

In photographs, what is uncanny is the *punctum*, which, as we have said, is the detail in the photo that pricks me, that disrupts the *studium's* harmony, order, and identifiable meaning. To make sense of the *punctum* and of the uncanny, we may turn to Freud's "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." In his 1920 essay, he postulates the existence of two fundamental principles that drive human behavior: the pleasure principle and the "death instinct."<sup>45</sup> The pleasure principle states that our bodies (and minds) are designed to rid themselves of tension (what Freud calls "unpleasure"; this includes hunger, thirst, and sexual desire), such that all of our actions are motivated by "a lowering of that tension – that is, [...] an avoidance of unpleasure or a production of pleasure."<sup>46</sup> This drive is productive and life-sustaining, as it seeks to restore our constitution to a state of balance and harmony. At first glance, this seems intuitive and accurate. Yet, upon treating numerous patients who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, Freud realized that the pleasure principle offered an incomplete account of human behaviour. His patients, most of whom had fought in World War I, would constantly recall their most painful memories (consciously, in therapy and unconsciously, in dreams), "reviv[ing] them with the greatest ingenuity."<sup>47</sup> But this repetition is stale, unproductive, and contradicts the pleasure principle: instead of releasing tension, this "compulsion to repeat" only heightens tension, only disturbs our constitution, and only generates imbalance and chaos.<sup>48</sup> Freud cannot explain these "mysterious masochistic trends of the ego" that all humans seem to bear, but nonetheless we cannot deny their existence.<sup>49</sup> This leads him to posit the existence of a second fundamental drive that opposes the pleasure principle and seeks to negate it: the "death instinct."<sup>50</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Freud, "The Uncanny," 7.

<sup>45</sup> Sigmund Freud, Salman Akhtar, and Mary K. O'Neil, *On Freud's "Beyond the Pleasure Principle"* (London: Karnac Books, 2011), 55.

<sup>46</sup> Freud et al., "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," 13.

<sup>47</sup> Freud et al., "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," 27.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

Freud's account of these two antagonistic—but intertwined—drives maps onto Barthes' theory of photography. The pleasure principle (or "Eros") corresponds to the *studium*: both embody harmony, order, balance, cohesion, and meaning. Meanwhile, the death instinct is analogous to the *punctum*. Both the death instinct and the *punctum* disturb the harmony and meaning of the pleasure principle and the *studium*, respectively. This meaning is intelligible: James van der Zee's "Family Portrait" is the picture of an African-American family living in Harlem in 1926. The woman's eerie hand becomes such a fixation to me that I ignore all of the other elements present in "Family Portrait"; the death instinct causes traumatic war memories to repeatedly resurface in Freud's patients' minds, thereby shattering all semblance of serenity, harmony, or meaning. Both cases indeed resist meaning: nothing can fully capture what makes the contorted hand creepy to me, and nothing can explain why this particular detail resonates within me but not necessarily within every other Spectator. Likewise, the veterans' stale repetition of painful memories cannot be contextualized by any philosophical or scientific system; it refuses to be understood within the organized, satisfying framework of the pleasure principle.

Thus, Barthes' main disagreement with Merleau-Ponty has to do with the latter's belief that images (and especially paintings) are endlessly meaningful. According to Barthes, pictures have a limited semiology: "all we can say is that the [photograph] speaks, it induces us, vaguely to think."<sup>51</sup> The photograph's meaning is evident and restrained: it can be recognized by any Spectator. Indeed, anyone who looks at William Klein's "Mayday, 1959" will say that it is a picture of an old woman with a scarf wrapped around her head, gazing menacingly at the lens, and surrounded by seven men of varying ages. More specifically, the work's title informs us that these people are in Moscow in 1959. This is the definite subject of "Mayday, 1959": the photo will never be about tulips in seventeenth century Amsterdam, or fishermen in nineteenth century Brazil. Thus, even though an image may provoke different emotions in viewers, the image's meaning will always be contingent, circumscribed, and "a closed field of forces."<sup>52</sup> It is therefore incorrect to claim, as Merleau-Ponty would, that "Mayday, 1959" can be interpreted in an infinite number of ways. Spectators might be wounded by different *punctums*, which are, as Barthes puts it, "outside of meaning."<sup>53</sup> However, for all viewers the photo's *studium*, which "aim[s] at generality [...] by assuming a mask," is the same.<sup>54</sup>

Barthes challenges Merleau-Ponty's contention that paintings "come to life" and make visible "the overtaking, the overlapping, the metamorphosis [...] of time."<sup>55</sup> Instead, Barthes claims, they freeze time: they capture a moment that is dead and that is bound never to happen again. Barthes indeed believes that Death "is the *eidōs*" (the

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<sup>51</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 38.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>53</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 34.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 145.

essence) of Photography.<sup>56</sup> To view a photo capturing a moment that one has lived is to be reminded of the fleetingness of one's life and of the inevitability of death. Many photographs—especially ones dating back to a time when sitters had to pose for several hours when they had their picture taken—possess a haunting, “deathly” quality. (“Family Portrait” is the perfect example of this phenomenon: the figures appear to be spectral—far from “life-like.”) Barthes argues that the experience of being photographed is also like death: the photographer's “target” (subject) experiences “a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter, [...] Death in person.”<sup>57</sup> This is because I feel like I am being transformed from a “subject into [an] object”: whenever someone takes my picture, I feel a strange sense of inauthenticity, for I perceive my “real” self being misrepresented—*distorted* even—by the camera lens.<sup>58</sup> Conscious that I am being watched (and “captured” by another person), I pose and change my behaviour in a “cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity.”<sup>59</sup> Moreover, when I look at a portrait of myself, I feel alienated, for my deep “self” “never coincides with my image”: while I am “light,” moving, and alive, my image is “heavy [and] motionless”—in short, dead.<sup>60</sup> It is no coincidence then that Barthes relates photography to Freud's “death instinct.” Death punctures life much like the *punctum* disrupts the *studium* and the death drive obstructs the pleasure principle. Life is not intrinsically meaningful; rather, we bestow meaning onto it because our existence would seem pointless otherwise. By extension, paintings can never be “alive” or meaningful in the way that Merleau-Ponty claims they are.

Hence, Merleau-Ponty and Barthes appear to be in a stalemate on the question of meaning-making in image consciousness. Merleau-Ponty offers a convincing argument for the hermeneutic possibilities of painting, but his theory does not consider the death instinct. Moreover, while both philosophers agree that images have the ability to affect us (whether by wounding us or by moving us), Barthes' concepts of the *studium* and the *punctum* do not easily map onto Merleau-Ponty's theory. This makes comparing both accounts tricky. Added to this is the fact that they focus on different visual mediums: Barthes mostly talks about photography, whereas Merleau-Ponty only discusses painting. The two thus seem to approach the same question with a different set of considerations, and this might be why they arrive at radically different conclusions. Perhaps Merleau-Ponty crystallizes the conundrum best: “ambiguity is the essence of human existence, and everything we live or think has always several meanings,”—including meaninglessness.<sup>61</sup> ♦

56 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 15.

57 Barthes, 14.

58 *Ibid.*, 13.

59 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 12.

60 *Ibid.*

61 Richard Askay and Jensen Farquhar, *Apprehending the Inaccessible: Freudian Psychoanalysis and Existential Phenomenology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 296.



**Figure 1:** Vincent van Gogh, *Wheatfield with Crows*, 1890. 50.2 cm × 103 cm (19.9 in × 40.6 in). Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.



**Figure 2:** William Klein, "Mayday, 1959". Moscow, 1959.



**Figure 3:** James van der Zee, "Family Portrait". Harlem, 1926.



**Figure 4:** Lars von Trier, *Breaking the Waves* (1996).

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