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On the (So Called) Problem of Detail:

Michael Fried, Roland Barthes, and Roger Scruton on Photography and Intentionality

“The photographer... who aims for an aesthetically significant representation must also aim to control detail; ‘detail’ being here understood in the wide sense of ‘any observable fact or feature.’ But here lies a fresh difficulty. The causal process of which the photographer is a victim puts almost every detail outside of his control. Even if he does, say, intentionally arrange each fold of his subject’s dress and meticulously construct, as studio photographers once used to do, the appropriate scenario, that would still hardly be relevant, since there seem to be few ways in which such intentions can be revealed in the photograph.”

Roger Scruton, “Photography and Representation”

“There is no detail in photography.”

Jeff Wall at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, January 13, 2015

1. The Problem: Scruton, Barthes, and Fried on Detail in Photography¹

As anyone reading a volume devoted to Michael Fried and philosophy will know, Roger

¹ I would like to thank Mathew Abbott, Jason Gaiger, Dominic McIver Lopes, and Stephen Mulhall for their comments on this paper in draft, and the audiences of the first Frankfurt-Warwick Seminar in Aesthetics (Frankfurt, April 2017) and the Art, History and Perception workshop (Toronto, May 2017).

Scruton is not – to put it weakly – the kind of philosopher with whom Fried would typically be associated.² Even setting broader questions of philosophical orientation, tradition, and temperament aside, and focusing solely on their respective claims about photography: Scruton is photography’s arch aesthetic skeptic, Fried the leading champion of its newly elevated artistic status and centrality.

Scruton’s skepticism regarding photography’s status as a “representational art,” where this requires the fully articulated expression of thoughts about what is depicted, pivots on his claim that the mechanics of photographic image-generation restrict photographers’ ability to control detail throughout the image. Because automatically captured images do not admit of *non-systematic* selection – that is, selection according to parameters subjectively determined by the agent, rather than engineered into the apparatus, film stock, or software – one can never be certain what to attribute significance to in the resulting image. Much of what appears may only do so because it was in shot alongside the intended subject, and this undermines our confidence about what the photographer intended to communicate. Should we take *everything* in the image as relevant to its intended meaning? What about the out of focus shrubbery in the background, the stones along the roadside, faint signs of wear on the furniture, or grime on a shirt cuff? The photograph itself does not tell us whether the photographer even noticed them, or so the standard story goes. This has been a recurrent worry in reflection on photography.³

² Scruton was in fact invited to contribute to a symposium on Fried’s *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* by *The British Journal of Aesthetics* (51: 1, 2011), but his contribution and the response it elicited, were deemed too ill-tempered for publication.

³ See, for example, Elizabeth Eastlake, “Photography” (1857) in Alan Trachtenberg (ed.), *Classic Essays on Photography* (New Haven: Leete’s Island Books, 1980), or Peter Henry

Lee Friedlander put it this way:

I only wanted Uncle Vern standing by his new car (a Hudson) on a clear day. I got him and the car. I also got a bit of Aunt Mary's laundry, and Beau Jack, the dog, peeing on a fence, and a row of potted tuberous begonias on the porch and 78 trees and a million pebbles in the driveway and more. It's a generous medium, photography.⁴

As often as photography has been criticized, down the years, by conservative critics such as Elizabeth Eastlake and Scruton for putting such minutiae beyond the reach of photographers, however, it has been celebrated for just the same reason. Thus Oliver Wendell Holmes, a contemporary of Eastlake's:

This distinctness of the lesser details of a building or a landscape often gives us

Emerson's retraction of his earlier defense of photography's artistic capacities in "The Death of Naturalistic Photography" (1891) in Andrew Hershberger (ed.) *Photographic Theory: An Historical Anthology* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 89. For the conceptual history, see "Pictorial and Pure Photography" in my *On Photography: A Philosophical Inquiry* (London: Routledge, 2017).

⁴ Friedlander, "An Excess of Fact," in *The Desert Seen* (New York: D.A.P., 1996), 104.

incidental truths which interest us more than the central object of the picture...

The very things which an artist would leave out, or render imperfectly, the photograph takes infinite care with.⁵

Or take Fried himself:

Barthes's observation... that the detail that strikes him as a *punctum* could not do so had it been intended as such by the photographer is an anti-theatrical claim in that it implies a fundamental distinction, which goes back to Diderot, between 'seeing' and 'being shown.' The *punctum*, one might say, is *seen* by Barthes, but not because it has been *shown* to him by the photographer, for whom it does not exist; as Barthes recognizes, 'it occurs [only] in the field of the photographed thing,' which is to say that it is a pure artefact of the photographic event – '[the photographer] could not *not* photograph the partial object at the same time as the total object' is how Barthes phrases it... (WPM 100)

I shall come back to the stakes of this claim for Fried. But note here that all parties to this debate *agree*, more or less, in their underlying conceptions of photography; where they disagree is in the conclusions they draw for its standing as art. The significance they attach to the fact that photographs routinely include much that was not intended by the photographer is

⁵ Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph" (*The Atlantic*, June 1859) in Trachtenberg, *Classic Essays*, 78-9.

a case in point: what strikes a photographer like Friedlander as the medium's "generosity" may strike a critic like Scruton, hyperbolically, as making the photographer a "victim" of her own process, but the understanding of photography underlying these evaluations is the same. Note, for example, that Barthes and Scruton agree on this score: there is much in the photograph that the photographer cannot control, so could not have intended. So much the better, according to Barthes, so much the worse according to Scruton; for Fried, it turns out, it is rather harder to say.

Call this the "Orthodox" conception of photography. Underlying different emphases, it is the view that photography is at bottom an automatic process in which a mechanical apparatus, rather than a human being, is responsible for the projection of a three-dimensional scene onto a two-dimensional, light sensitive surface that records momentary states of that scene according to a set of agent-independent protocols. "Agent independent" not in the sense that photography reduces to a set of natural processes – as calling photography a "discovery" rather than an "invention" implies – since human designers determine the parameters according to which cameras, lenses, film stocks, and computer algorithms operate; but in the sense that once initiated the process of image-generation takes place independently of the photographer. Call this the "encapsulation thesis:" photographers can determine input, and they may subject what is output to various forms of manipulation, but the informational channel from input to output is impervious to human intervention. Note that this applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to digital *post*-production: one must first have the outputs to go to work on.

Because the mechanics of photographic image-formation bypass the fallible mental states of human beings, it is not susceptible to false beliefs, non-systematically selective attention, subjective preferences, negligence or other forms of unreliability, epistemic or otherwise. The

upshot is that photography delivers images that depend causally and counterfactually on what was before the camera during the moment of exposure. This, taken in conjunction with the laws of optics and chemistry, and how the variables of camera and image-processing are set, causes the photograph to look the way it does and, assuming all are held constant, had what was before the camera at the moment of exposure been different, the image would have differed accordingly.

This set of assumptions is implicated by the writings of Scruton, Fried, and Barthes alike. For Scruton, the upshot is that while we can take an aesthetic interest in the objects or scene that the photograph makes perceptually available, we cannot take an aesthetic interest in the photograph as a *representation of* those objects or scene. For the photograph is not an expression of the artist's thoughts or feelings about those objects or scene, which we might take as an object of aesthetic appreciation; it is a record of how that scene looked under certain conditions. Rather than being a window onto the thoughts, beliefs, feelings, or intentions of the photographer, the photograph is a window onto the world it makes perceptually available. To this way of thinking, when we take what we believe is an aesthetic interest in a photograph, we unwittingly treat it as a surrogate for the objects or scene it makes available.

This set of claims is manifestly false, but my goal is not to demonstrate this here; it is to point out how naturally they fall out of the standard way of conceiving photography.⁶ Though Fried

⁶ On what wrong with these claims see: Dominic McIver Lopes, "The Aesthetics of Photographic Transparency," *Mind* (112, 2003), 433-48; Dawn M Wilson (née Phillips) "Photography and Causation: Responding to Scruton's Scepticism" and David Davies, "Scruton on the Inscrutability of Photographs" in *British Journal of Aesthetics* (49: 4, 2009),

is rightly critical of Scruton's views about the possibility of photographic art, he actually shares the conception of photography that motivates them. This is hardly a claim that Fried himself would endorse, of course, but that may be because the conception I have in mind is so pervasive, and so basic, as to seem more a statement of the obvious than anything amounting to a "theory" properly so-called; yet it nonetheless entails a set of commitments about the nature of photography that can be traced all the way back to photography's pioneers. Indeed, that it can may explain its air of self-evidence; it all but grounds contemporary folk theory of photography.⁷ That he shares these underlying assumptions may explain why, for example, Fried is exercised by a similar set of concerns about photographic detail, notably the opacity to intention that photographers' inability to fully control it is taken to occasion – even if he draws quite different conclusions to Scruton:

As Friedlander's remarks suggest, [John] Berger's 'weakness in intentionality' is correlative with an extraordinary copiousness built into the technology (the photographer in this view always gets more than he or she bargained for), a feature of the medium that it has been the genius of certain photographers, Friedlander among them, to exploit to the full. (So, whatever 'weakness in intentionality' means, it does not preclude photography being the vehicle of the strongest imaginable intentions on the part of gifted photographers. At the same time, it is

341-55; Peter Alward, "Transparent Representation: Photography and the Art of Casting," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (70: 1, 2012), 9-18; and "Aesthetic Scepticism and its Limitations" in *On Photography*.

⁷ See "Foundational Intuitions and Folk Theory" in *On Photography*.

precisely that feature of the ontology of the photograph that underwrites Barthes's notion of the *punctum*.) (WPM 272)

Such concerns only arise if one believes the standard story about photographs come into being is basically correct. Berger's "weak intentionality" thesis, for example, is the contention that photographs originate in a "single constitutive decision" on the part of photographers as to when to capture an image.⁸ That this is the extent of the photographer's control over the image is as clear an expression of Orthodoxy as one might hope for. Fried effectively grants this thesis, with respect to the determination of detail, and in this he concurs with Scruton. Unlike Scruton, he does not take this to preclude using photography to convey "the strongest imaginable intentions."⁹ Indeed, it is something that talented photographers exploit. This pattern of granting the basic assumptions of Orthodoxy, while contesting the anti-aesthetic conclusions often – though by no means universally – taken to follow from them, permeates Fried's work on photography.¹⁰ Locating Fried's settled position on the *significance* of intention for

⁸ See "Appearances," in Berger, *Understanding a Photograph* (London: Penguin, 2013), 65, as discussed in Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the turn of the Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 236-8.

⁹ Fried rarely cites Scruton directly, but see "Density of Decision: Greenberg with Robert Adams" *nonsite.org* (<http://nonsite.org/article/density-of-decision>, 2016) for an exception.

¹⁰ "By no means universally" because not all versions of Orthodoxy end in aesthetic skepticism. See "Transparency and its Critics" in *On Photography*.

photography is nonetheless no simple matter, as his references to Barthes's *punctum*, once set alongside his reading of Thomas Demand, bring out.

2. An “Ontological Guarantee” of Non-theatricality: Fried’s Barthes

Fried reads what is at stake in *Camera Lucida* – its “central thought” (WPM 95), whether Barthes was aware of it or not – as consonant with the animus of the anti-theatrical tradition that it has been one of the major goals of his own art historical work to trace from Denis Diderot and 18th Century French painting through to its crisis in Édouard Manet’s canvases of the 1860s. Until its dramatic recasting in Manet, the central problem facing painters in this tradition, according to Fried, was how to secure the complete attention of their viewers before the work. Painters sought to do this by “neutraliz[ing] the primordial convention that paintings are made to be beheld” (AT 93).¹¹ This was to be achieved by means of their pictures’ internal drama, specifically their depicted figures’ intense absorption in the fictional world of the painting, rather than any hint self-conscious posing, staginess, or projection towards their viewers in the non-fictional world before the work. Only by refusing to pander to the anticipated presence of their works’ viewers in this way could painters succeed in arresting those same viewers before the drama unfolding in their paintings.

¹¹ See also AT 103, 131, 153, and 157-8. For an overview, see IMAC, 47-54.

It is important to grasp that what counts (honorifically) as “dramatic” rather than (pejoratively) as “theatrical” on this narrative is a thoroughly historical variable, changing constantly in response to work of the recent past and its reception. This is why Fried calls anti-theatricality a “structure of artistic intention” on the part of artists and a counterpart “structure of demand, expectation, and reception” (IMAC 50) on the part of their audience, rather than a set of determinant properties that works do or do not possess once and for all. Whether a work is seen as one or the other can change over time, sometimes quite rapidly, in part as the result of changing artistic, social, and cultural sensibilities.

Fried’s interpretation of *Camera Lucida* should be read in this light. It seeks to draw out those aspects of Barthes’s final book that Fried takes to be consonant with his own anti-theatrical commitments. For Fried, the pivotal claim comes in §20:

Certain details may ‘prick’ me. If they do not, it is doubtless because the photographer has put them there intentionally. [T]he detail which interests me is not, or at least is not strictly, intentional, and probably must not be so; it occurs in the field of the photographed thing like a supplement that is at once inevitable and delightful; it does not necessarily attest to the photographer’s art; it says only that the photographer was there, or else, still more simply, that he could not *not* photograph the partial object at the same time as the total object... The Photographer’s ‘second sight’ does not consist in ‘seeing’ but in being there. Above

all, imitating Orpheus, he must not turn back to look at what he is leading – what he is giving to me!¹²

Fried takes the presence of a *punctum*, so understood, to function as “a kind of ontological guarantee” (WPM 102) of a photograph’s non-theatricality for Barthes. Unlike the *studium*, which operates at the level of intention and instruction, and circulates as part of a broader production of cultural knowledge, the *punctum*, in Fried’s formulation, is “seen but not shown” (WPM 100). As such, it cannot be a performance on the part of either the photographer or her subject: the latter is not performing, self-consciously, for the camera; the former is not performing for the viewer.

The *punctum* is also not something sought out by a viewer, but that “element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me.”¹³ Barthes offers a bewildering variety of terms to characterise this peculiar, disorienting detail: it is a prick, a mark, a puncture, a point, a wound, a sting, a speck, a cut, a little hole, a tiny shock or detonation, a disturbance, or series of such – a photograph may even be “speckled” with multiple such sensitive points – before concluding: “A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident, which pricks me (but also bruises

¹² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), §20/47e. Look back at my epigraph from Scruton: Barthes may celebrate what Scruton condemns, but they agree on the underlying facts about photography.

¹³ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, §10/26e.

me, is poignant to me).”¹⁴ To understand a photograph’s *studium*, by contrast, is “inevitably to encounter the photographer’s intentions, to enter into harmony with them, to approve or disapprove of them, but always to understand them...”¹⁵ It is the *non-intentional* quality of the *punctum*, one that disturbs the otherwise placid, cultural and intentional expanse of the *studium*, that fascinates Fried.

In stressing the *punctum*’s non-intentional nature, Fried plays down both its affective dimension and its personal significance for Barthes himself, this being the canonical reading of *Camera Lucida* against which he pitches his own. I suspect that this is the aspect of Fried’s reading that is likely to strike some readers as more than a little motivated, given the explicitly subjective framework of *Camera Lucida*, and the highly idiosyncratic associations that Barthes adduces to several of his key examples. Barthes’s responses to Andre Kertész’s *The Violinist’s tune. Abony, Hungary* (1921) and James van der Zee’s *The Family Portrait* (1926), for example, pivot on triggering recollections of his youthful travels in Hungary and Romania, and memories of a sad “maiden aunt,” respectively; memories called up by the dirt road on which the blind violinist walks in the former, and the thin braided gold necklace worn by one of the sitters in the latter.¹⁶

¹⁴ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, §10/27e.

¹⁵ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, §11/27-8e.

¹⁶ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, §19/45e, §19/43e, and §22/53e.

In the teeth of these responses, which arguably reveal more about Barthes than the photographs that occasion them, Fried singles out the *punctum*'s non-intentional nature – the fact that it gets into the photograph despite the photographer – as what does the heavy lifting in Barthes's account. But one may wonder, especially in light of some of Barthes's more gnomic pronouncements, whether the *punctum* is really “in” the photograph at all. “I may know better a photograph I remember than a photograph I am looking at,” Barthes claims, before concluding: “Ultimately – or at the limit – in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes.”¹⁷ Modifying Fried, one might say that the *punctum* is “felt rather than shown;” perhaps even that it is not the kind of thing that could be shown, because not in candidacy to be seen. But if it is not to be seen, and not in the photograph, what and where is it? The *punctum*, if it may be said to reside anywhere, seems to reside in the affective response triggered in a particular viewer by some incidental detail in a photograph. Indeed the *punctum* appears to pick out the *event* of being bruised or cut by such a detail. Or rather, Barthes sometimes frames it in these terms – “this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow and pierces me” – only to go on to characterize it, as if interchangeably, as an *object*: “A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument.”¹⁸ So understood, “*punctum*” sometimes picks out a causal relation – what the photograph does to me – and at other times the wound or cut I suffer as a result. In neither case, however, is it simply a feature of the photograph.

¹⁷ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, §22/53e.

¹⁸ Barthes *Camera Lucida*, §10/26e.

But the innocuous detail that affects one viewer in this way need not affect other viewers in the same way. In the unlikely event that it does, this cannot be for the same reasons, unless – *per impossibile* – those viewers also share both their histories and a disposition to respond to those histories in the same way. But how many of us can claim sad maiden aunts with slender gold chains or to have travelled the dirt roads of *Mitteleuropa* in our impressionable youths, not to mention Barthes’s disposition to respond to both in certain characteristic ways? The *punctum*, as Barthes describes it in Part I of *Camera Lucida*, clearly implicates the associations that *particular* viewers bring to particular photographs: “Last thing about the *punctum*: whether or not it is triggered, it is an addition: it is what I add to the photograph and *what is nonetheless already there*.”¹⁹ Thus, of Lewis Hine’s *Idiot Children in an Institution, New Jersey* (1924), Barthes observes: “[W]hat I add – and what, of course is already in the image – is the collar, the bandage.”²⁰ Barthes does not literally add them, of course; what he adds is their *significance*, their intense meaningfulness to him personally.

That it is in the nature of such associations, being private, to be beyond the reach of the photographer, however, has no implications for whether the detail in the photograph that triggers them is or is not intended. That my associations to something in a photograph cannot

¹⁹ Fried is alive to this implication. Immediately after my citation from “Barthes’s *Punctum*” (WPM 100) above, he continues: “Perhaps, more precisely, [the *punctum*] is an artefact of the encounter between the product of that [photographic] event and one particular spectator or beholder.”

²⁰ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, §23/55e.

be intentionally targeted (unless known in advance) does not entail that the detail itself cannot be. For how can we *know* that the photographer did not try out (*could not* have tried out) various necklaces, belts, or pumps before settling on the combination that best suited his purposes? We cannot know this. What we can know is that the photographer could not have intended Barthes's, or anyone else's, private associations, given their highly personal nature and the fact that in many cases the origin of those associations will post-date the photographer's own death. But whether a given piece of jewellery or clothing has such an effect is a psychological fact about the viewer, and his or her personal history, it is *not* a fact (certainly not a necessary fact) about what the photographer did or did not intend.²¹

For this reason, the presence of a *punctum* cannot function as the kind of "ontological" – which I take, in this context, to mean – "cast iron" guarantee that Fried takes Barthes to be after. From the fact that a photograph has a *punctum* for me, I cannot infer that the detail that triggers it must have been unintended; all I can infer (assuming I am unknown to the photographer) is that the photographer did not intend whatever it is to trigger this reaction in me. Conversely, from the fact that a photograph has no *punctum* for me, I cannot infer that everything in it must

²¹ Michaels, who stresses the centrality of individual experience to the *punctum*, nonetheless believes "privacy is not... the central issue" and that the *punctum* is not "intrinsically private." This is because understanding the *punctum* in these terms rules out Barthes's second *punctum*, the "that has been." But this is only a worry if one thinks the two halves of *Camera Lucida* add up to a single, internally coherent theory. See Michaels, "Photography and Fossils," in James Elkins (ed.) *Photography Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 439. See also "Formal Feelings," in Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

have been intended; all I can infer is that there is nothing in it, intended or otherwise, given my history and disposition to respond in certain ways, to so affect me.

Everything that I have said so far assumes that Fried gets Barthes basically right on the question of intention. But what if he does not? Those who find Fried's reading motivated, in downplaying Barthes's own stress on subjective experience in favour of the non-theatrical because unintended detail, will think that he is hardening up Barthes claims in the service of his own project. And this is true. What Barthes says in §20 is typically weaker than the more trenchant views that Fried attributes to him. Thus Fried stresses Barthes's opening remark: "certain details may 'prick' me. If they do not it is doubtless because the photographer has put them there intentionally." But Barthes himself continues: "the detail that interests me is not, *or at least is not strictly*, intentional, and *probably* must not be so... it does not *necessarily* attest to the photographer's art" (my italics). This is considerably more hedged with qualifications than Fried's interpretation would suggest, and correspondingly more defensible. But this is hardly news; it is a standard trope of strong reading.

An alternative response is offered by Walter Benn Michaels, who grants Fried's interpretation, but takes the remarks he alights upon as pointing to a quite different conclusion to the one that Fried himself draws. For Michaels, Barthes's commitment to subjective experience – such that what a photograph means to you need have no bearing upon what (if anything) it means to me or, indeed, whatever it may have been intended to mean by the photographer – should be regarded as of a piece with the literalist stress on subjective experience to which Fried is otherwise so opposed. If a literalist work is structurally incomplete without the participation of its animating subject, to the extent that the "participant viewer" is not only a component of the work, but the work can be said to *reduce to* the experience it elicits in a given subject, then it

becomes hard not to read Barthes's valorization of the *punctum* as an expression of a literalist sensibility.²² For on Barthes's account, a moving photograph is not merely incomplete but *inert* without a particular viewer's response to bring it to life.²³ Barthes's consignment of the entire realm of intention, otherwise so valorized by Fried, to the preserve of *studium* makes it hard to see Barthes – champion of the reader's birth from the ashes of the author's death – and Fried as fellow travellers in any obvious sense. By bracketing the photographer's intentions in favour of the viewer's response, Barthes seems to identify what is valuable in photography, as he understands it, with what is meretricious in minimalism, as Fried understands it.²⁴ It is not clear what we should make of this, but Fried's reading of Demand's photographs as "images of sheer authorial intention" sheds an interesting sidelight on these issues.

²² Michaels, "Photographs and Fossils," 431-350. Fried acknowledges the worry in "Barthes's *Punctum*," *Critical Inquiry* (31: 3, 2005) 572-3, but has yet to really engage with it. See also WPM 270-1 and 345-6.

²³ When a viewer animates a photograph in this way, they endow it with what Barthes calls a "blind field," or life beyond the frame. See *Camera Lucida*, §23/57e.

²⁴ For Michaels, not only does this make the significance of photographs dependent on the response of particular viewers, it pushes Barthes's interest in photography beyond the realm of art. This is not a worry for Barthes, given that his interest in photography is expressly *not* an interest in photography as art; but it ought to be a worry for Fried, given that "theatricality" pertains explicitly to mode of artistic address. See Michaels, "Photographs and Fossils," 440.

3. “Allegories of Intendedness as Such:” Fried’s Demand

As is well known, Demand makes his images by photographing models and sets that he and his assistants construct from paper and card. These constructions are typically based on images derived from newspapers and magazines of seemingly anodyne or undistinguished looking places. Though sometimes referred to as “crime scenes” they are as often places in which events of some social, political, or historical importance have taken place: the tiny kitchen in Tikrit used by Saddam Hussein while hiding from US Armed Forces; the Emergency Operations Center in Palm Beach, Florida, in which the infamous “hanging chads” from the Al Gore versus George W. Bush election were examined; the aftermath of Claus von Stauffenberg’s failed bomb plot against Hitler in July 1944; the looted offices of the Stasi following the collapse of the GDR; the corridor of the Milwaukee apartment block in which the notorious serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer committed his crimes; and so on.

From such socially or politically charged scenes Demand makes images that seem almost pointedly cold and lifeless. Barthes would no doubt have hated them – no punctum, and certainly no “blind field,” or so it would seem. The question Fried poses is simple, but fundamental: *Why?* Why go to so much trouble to produce images that not only purge their referents of most of their identifying features, but remove all signs of everyday wear and tear, and more general historical accretions, that might distinguish them from other such objects and scenes? For the upshot is images that, in at least one respect, resemble one another more than they do the scenes from which they derive – for whatever is rendered, it is rendered in the same anodyne fashion.

The answer Fried gives eschews any reference to the deadening effect of mediated images on our lives, or our engagement with politics and history, and instead situates Demand's way of making photographs as a refutation of standard worries about photography's "weak intentionality."²⁵ According to Fried, Demand addresses the standard worry head on, by assuming responsibility for everything that appears in his images. There is no possibility of a *punctum* in such images, as Fried reads Barthes, because there is no room for the unintended detail: after all, if Demand or his assistants had not made and positioned whatever it is just so, it could not have shown up in the image in the way that it does. The upshot is images that express a commitment to the very idea of intendedness: "Demand's aim is not to make a wholly intended object [Fried is thinking of the control that digital technologies are widely believed to afford], but rather to make pictures that *represent* or *indeed allegorize intendedness as such*, and this turns out to require exploiting the 'weakness' of the traditional photographic image precisely in that regard" (WPM 272).

Demand does this by leveraging our knowledge that his images are straightforward documents of what was before the camera at the moment of exposure – as all photographs must be on the Orthodox account. As such, his images are bound to record, impartially and non-selectively, whatever was in frame at the moment of exposure. But given that they can thereby record only

²⁵ In a more recent paper on Demand's reconstruction and reanimation of just over two minutes of onboard footage from one of the dining rooms of the ocean liner *Pacific Sun* while being buffeted by high swells, Fried stresses the scale of such an undertaking: the amount of expertise, labour, and sheer will required to pull off this seemingly simple, but in fact immensely complex, task (see AL 251-69).

what Demand and his assistants are responsible for, they remain monuments to Demand's intentions nonetheless. The imperviousness of such images to unintended details of the kind that are "seen but not shown" could hardly be clearer. Fried's reasoning fully accords with that of Barthes and Scruton here: Demand may succeed where Scruton claims photography must fail, but it is only because photography does indeed suffer – or so at least it is thought – from the problem that Scruton identifies that a demonstration such as Demand's has bite. Demand's practice, as Michaels notes, would make little sense in painting; that painting is intentional is not exactly news.²⁶ Similarly, it is only because photography is widely believed to suffer such an intentional deficit that – anomalous practices like Demand's aside – the *punctum* remains a standing possibility. That Fried shares these widely held beliefs about photography goes some way to explaining why he reads Demand's images as he does. If he did not, there would be less to get excited about in such a demonstration:

Simply put, [Demand] aims above all to replace the original scene of evidentiary traces and marks of human use – the historical world in all its all its layeredness and compositeness – with images of *sheer authorial intention*, although the very bizarreness of the fact that the scenes and objects of the photographs, despite their initial appearance of quotidian 'reality,' have all been constructed by the artist throws into conceptual relief the determining force (also the inscrutability, one might almost say the opacity) of the intention behind it...

²⁶ Michaels, "Photographs and Fossils," 443-4.

[P]erhaps the best that can be said is that Demand seeks to make pictures that
*thematize or indeed allegorize intendedness as such...*²⁷

This curious dialectic between allegorizing intention as such and thereby rendering the artist's actual intentions – I take this to refer to Demand's reasons for allegorizing intention as such, or what he might mean by doing so – opaque or inscrutable strikes me as the most intriguing aspect of this reading. Those familiar with Fried's early criticism cannot but hear an echo of his celebration of Anthony Caro here: "It is as though Caro's sculptures essentialize *meaningfulness as such* – as though the possibility of meaning what we say and do *alone* makes his sculpture possible" (AO 162). "Essentializing meaningfulness as such" – that is, not projecting this or that particular meaning, but an understanding of what it is to be capable of meaning at all – is clearly a close cousin of "allegorizing intendedness as such." Both involve not so much a particular act of intending or meaning, as foregrounding what is distinctively human about the capacity for intending or meaning (our lives, actions, or utterances) at all.²⁸ This commonality is hardly coincidental. For both are pitched in Fried's mind against the

²⁷ Fried, "Without a Trace," 202-3.

²⁸ This is reminiscent of Stanley Cavell's idea of "attunement in judgement," underlying the possibility of agreement or disagreement in this or that particular judgement. See, for example, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 29-36; and "Declining Decline: Wittgenstein as a Philosopher of Culture," in *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque: Living Batch Press, 1989), 40-52.

literalist disavowal of final responsibility for their work's meaning, and its theatrical projection towards the anticipated spectator required to complete it instead.

Though Demand's practice seems, at least morphologically, a much less obvious candidate to counter-pose to minimalism than Caro's, focusing narrowly on morphology would be to miss Fried's point. Fried's account of the contrast between taking responsibility for a work's internal relations, by fully intending them to be as they are, rather than any other way, versus a situation in which "although conditioned in a general way by the circumstances of exhibition," the relationships set up between work and beholder on any given occasion are understood as "emphatically not determined by the work itself, and therefore as not intended as such by its maker" (WPM 270-1), suggests it is more a matter of the respective practices' attitude or spirit. Literalists such as Carl Andre and Robert Morris, according to Fried, were masters at creating theatrical installations to be completed by their anticipated viewers' passage through them. But while the meta-intentions animating their installations may have been clear, the meaning of individual works within them was left open to viewers to determine.

But consider Demand's images again in this light. Demand's practice of photographically documenting paper and card reconstructions of existing photographs may express a strong commitment to artistic *intentionality* for all the reasons Fried gives, but what about the *meaning* of individual works? The works themselves seem to be reduced to ciphers for the meta-intention animating the project as a whole on this account. While the corpus emerges as something expressing a clear artistic purpose, the meaning of individual works within it remains blank: cold, alienating, inscrutable, opaque. Isn't something very similar true of minimalism? From Fried's perspective, one wonders why such opacity of meaning, at the level

of the individual work, does not raise the worry that it invites viewers to project their own, subjective interpretations – whatever these may be – upon them.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that the meaning of Demand's images can – or should – be reduced to whatever subjective associations they happen to trigger in the individual viewer, in the way that the *punctum* clearly does on Barthes account; but, rather, that what Demand *means* by showing us (say) a pared down view of the hallway outside Jeffrey Dahmer's apartment, or a depopulated view of the aftermath of the failed Valkyrie bomb plot against Hitler, remains opaque. Are we supposed to take the two images – produced according to the same general intention, if Fried is right – as on a par? Are we being invited to view, say, Dahmer's crimes as somehow comparable to a failed bomb plot that might have ended the War a year earlier and, if so, according to what possible reasoning? We are left none the wiser as to what individual works might mean, however strong a case Fried makes for the intentions underlying the project as whole. That is, the ways it might matter that Demand chose this image rather than that to reconstruct, of this event rather than that and, perhaps especially, why he made these rather than any other editorial decisions in their transcriptions.²⁹ This seems to align Demand's practice with minimalism, rather than vice versa. If what we are to make of specific images remains this indeterminate, it is hard to see Demand's practice as “fundamentally, not to say hyperbolically, opposed to the literalist attitude.”³⁰ For the minimalists, by Fried's own

²⁹ Demand's source images reveal that he does much more than simply “reconstruct” pre-existing scenes. This seriously underplays the degree of editorializing undertaken in their three-dimensional realization. To take just one example: the disappearance of not one but three kettles and two milk or coffee pans from Saddam's kitchen. What does this signify?

³⁰ Fried, “Without a Trace,” 202.

account, had just as strong a general intention – to create a theatrical mis-en-scène to be activated by the viewer’s presence – while leaving it up to viewers to decide what to make of the works themselves.

A common elision may underlie this result: Fried’s reading reduces the meaning of Demand’s works to that of the intention animating the project as a whole. The sticking point may be an ambiguity in the notion of intentionality itself, especially as used in debates about art. Scruton makes essentially the same reduction, albeit in the course of underplaying, rather than celebrating, the role of intentionality in photography. When Scruton claims that the causal basis of photography precludes intentionality, he conceives it in such a way as to rule out both expressing a thought about or attitude towards what is depicted by means of the way it is depicted (the possibility that photographs have meanings or that photographers can use them to express meanings) *and* photographs themselves being products of intentional action (the possibility that photography as an activity could be fully agential). But these are distinct in ways that Scruton’s account fails to acknowledge. Expressing a thought or attitude is often intentional, but need not be: a Royal portrait may betray an attitude towards the sitter (“power corrupts”) – this would be part of the work’s meaning – that the court artist might not be aware of holding, and certainly does not intend to express if she is. And there are a great many intentional actions, such as tying one’s shoes or cutting one’s food, that need not express any attitude towards a mental content. Fried’s reading of Demand makes the same reduction. It reduces the question of what individual images *mean* to the question of what Demand *intends* by making images in this way, thereby rendering the former opaque:

[T]he primacy of experience... meant that *meaning* in literalism was essentially indeterminate, every subject's necessarily unique response to a given work-in-a-situation standing on an equal footing with every other's. Viewed against this background, Demand's project... comes into intellectual focus... [H]e aims above all to replace the original scene of evidentiary traces and marks of human use... with images of sheer authorial *intention*.³¹

Fried views Demand's stress on intention as a response to what he perceives as the minimalists' failure to take responsibility for their work's meaning. My point is that not only can these not be identified (since they often come apart) but that Demand's emphasis on intention over meaning, notably the ways in which the former seems to come at the cost of the latter, if Fried is right, might instead be regarded as consistent with minimalism. Certainly, nothing in Fried's interpretation rules this out.

4. The Original Problem Reconsidered

I want to conclude by noting a basic tension between Fried's reading of Barthes and Demand, before considering what might explain it. Recall that, according to Fried, Barthes wants the

³¹ Fried, "Without a Trace," 202 (my italics). On the difference between meaning and intention in debates about photography more generally, see Michaels: "I Do what Happens: Anscombe and Winogrand," *nonsite.org* (<http://nonsite.org/article/i-do-what-happens>, 2016), Lopes, "Making, Meaning, and Meaning by Making," and Michaels, "Anscombe and Winogrand, Danto and Mapplethorpe: A Reply to Dominic McIver Lopes," *nonsite.org* (<http://nonsite.org/article/making-meaning-and-meaning-by-making>, 2016).

punctum to function as “ontological guarantee” of a photograph’s non-theatricality, because it pertains to a marginal detail that could not have been intended. The modal nature of this claim is key: it is because this detail *cannot* have been intended that the *punctum* is even in candidacy to serve as a guarantee of this kind. But the claim in this modal form is false: we cannot *know* that the detail was not intended; all we can know is that the associations that a given detail may or may not provoke in a given viewer, being private, could not have been intended. And this seems, as Michaels notes, to align Barthes with, rather than against, literalism.

On Fried’s reading of Demand, by contrast, it is the fact that everything in the photograph is only there because the photographer put it there, the fact that his images are *fully* intended, that is supposed to resist the threat of theatricality. By constructing his “allegories of intendedness” from the ground up, Demand forecloses the possibility exploited by literalism that each viewer might make what they will of his images. I have argued that much in Fried’s own reading suggests the opposite; as Fried reads Demand, the meta-intention animating the project as a whole is clear, but what any specific image within it might mean is rendered curiously opaque. In effect, intention comes at the cost of meaning.

So much for my criticisms: set aside the question of whether either is on target and return to Fried’s claims. Taken at face value, they certainly seem to be contradictory: on the one hand, we have the non-theatrical as what *cannot* have been intended, and on the other we have the non-theatrical as what must be *fully* intended. Can the contradiction be defused? A philosopher’s solution might be: the *punctum* is sufficient but cannot be necessary to defeat theatricality, since Demand’s photographs succeed in doing so despite being bereft of *puncta*. So having a *punctum* suffices to rule out theatricality, but is not required to do so. To take an obvious example: modernist painting and sculpture resist theatricality on Fried’s account, but

not by virtue of possessing *puncta*. Although consistent with what Fried says, this does not help with questions internal to photography; and whatever may be true of Demand's practice is unlikely to generalize, given its idiosyncratic nature.

An alternative solution would be to see whether the idea of theatricality is being used in a number of different ways that do not always align.³² In Fried's reading of Barthes, "theatricality" picks out the way in which a photograph might be thought to perform for, pander to, or be otherwise projected towards a viewer; if the detail that touches the viewer is not intended it cannot be such a performance. In his account of Demand, "theatricality" picks out the way in which a work might be thought to depend on the viewer for its completion; Demand's work is anti-theatrical because it does not leave this open. I have taken issue with each of these claims separately, but the salient point here is that while these two descriptions of theatricality – being self-consciously directed towards the viewer, and requiring a viewer for the work's completion – do not come to quite the same thing, since something that is *already* complete in itself can nonetheless be directed towards an audience, and something can be incomplete in other ways, without being so directed, they are clearly consistent. They pick out two ways in which a work or image might be thought to "wait upon" its viewer.

This is the core of the idea, and while what *counts as* theatrical may have changed down the years, as has the term's relation to others in the Friedian corpus, this much has been clear from

³² I pursue a similar question concerning the relation between "theatre" and "theatricality" in "On the Very Idea of a 'Specific' Medium: Michael Fried and Stanley Cavell on Painting and Photography as Arts," in *Critical Inquiry* (34: 2, 2008), 274-312.

the get go. But therein lies the deeper problem; for if the idea of theatricality *is* being used consistently throughout, how could one and the same relation be defeated both by an image being unintended *and* by an image being fully intended? It is hard to see how both claims could be true.

But could this perception result from not taking Fried's own account of the historical vicissitudes of theatricality seriously enough? Given that Fried stresses the historical nature of what counts as theatricality – take the contrast between Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin and Manet – need there be any contradiction in claiming that this can be achieved in different ways in Barthes and Demand? This is a serious response, but it nonetheless misidentifies the worry. I am not claiming that there is any conflict in what counts as theatrical on Fried's account of Barthes and Demand; indeed my point arises from acknowledging that there is not. Rather, the tension resides in how theatricality relates to intentionality. It concerns whether it is coherent to characterise theatricality as both the kind of thing that can only be defeated intentionally, and the kind of thing that can only be defeated unintentionally. The analogy to Chardin and Manet is thus misplaced; not only is there no conflict between what counts as theatrical in Fried's accounts of Barthes and Demand, but it is questionable whether they are even concerned with (or engaged in) the same activity. Barthes is interested in vernacular photographs that are expressly not works of art; Demand makes photographs in a way that would make no sense outside the artworld. It seems equally implausible to see Demand as in dialogue with Barthes as it does to think of Demand as reconfiguring an entire artistic tradition in the way that Manet's epochal canvases of the 1860s did.

The conflict with respect to theatricality's conditions of possibility remains. My suggestion for defusing it straightforward: Fried should give up trying to recruit Barthes for the anti-theatrical

cause; that the *punctum* is structurally incomplete until activated by a particular viewer required for its completion could not be clearer. With this the inconsistency dissolves: Barthes's celebration of the *punctum* (though not his account of photography per se) is theatrical, because non-unary photographs require particular viewers for their completion; Demand's work is not, because it does not put the same burden on its viewers. If I remain to be persuaded that the latter claim is in fact true, that amounts to a critical difference with Fried; it has no implications for the consistency of his theory. There is no doubt more to say about what specific Demands might mean; it simply remains to be demonstrated either way.

The tension between Fried's treatments of Barthes and Demand prompts an interesting question: could there be a *punctum* in Demand? Prima facie, the answer would seem to be no. If everything is intended how could there be a *punctum*, when that requires some unintended detail to be seen despite not being shown? But if, as I have argued, it is only one's private associations that cannot be intended, then nothing prevents even images as "saturated" with intention as Demand's from triggering unexpected responses in their viewers. Perhaps this seems unlikely, but consider the viewer who, as a child, spent long summer evenings with her maternal grandfather (now deceased) building elaborate dolls houses from wood and card – *ein typisch deutscher Zeitvertrieb*. For such a viewer, certain imperfections – a way of joining two cardboard facets to create an edge, perhaps indicative of an unsteady (elderly?) hand, or a youthful haste to finish before being called to table – may one day trigger associations and memories long since forgotten, perhaps a whole Proustian armature of *gut bürgerliche Küche*, the pervasive aroma of pipe smoke, muffled sounds from the neighbourhood *Spielplatz*. Perhaps this viewer may one day feel all this "with her whole body" on coming across some insignificant detail that no one else might notice, let alone see fit to remark, in a work by

Demand.³³ Note that, if she does, her response would have nothing to do with the meaning of the work that triggers it and, in this, it would be no more wide of the mark than Barthes's responses to Kertész or Van der Zee in its idiosyncrasies.

But my title refers to the “so-called” problem of detail in photography. How does all this bear on that problem? Throughout I have noted the respects in which the three views under consideration implicate what I call the “Orthodox” conception of photography. It is the associated view of restricted photographic agency (Berger’s “weakness in intentionality”) that brings in train the usual worries about photographers being unable to exert sufficient control of their images, and how far this compromises their standing as art. This may be most obvious in Scruton, but it is equally true of the assumptions driving Barthes’s understanding of the *punctum*, in both its formulations, and Fried’s take on the significance of intention in Barthes and Demand respectively.

Could Fried’s commitment to this view be responsible for some of the tensions I have diagnosed here? It is only because Fried and Michaels are committed to this view, for example, that they see photography as the contemporary terrain on which the dialectic between art and objecthood plays out. In their exchange about the respects in which photographs might be understood as traces, imprints, or fossils rather than pictures of their referents proper – the Orthodox view *in nuce* – Fried remarks: “this basic feature of photographs can be taken as raising fundamental doubts about their status as works of art: is not a mechanically produced artefact... closer in essence (closer ontologically) to an object than to any kind of

³³ The reference is to Barthes’s response to Kertész (see Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, §19/45e).

representation?” (WPM 335-6).³⁴ That is, the mechanical nature of photographic image-generation pushes its products closer to *mere* artifactuality, or objecthood *simpliciter*. Hence the title of Fried’s book on photography: when the photographic tableau became a staple of contemporary artistic production, the need to defeat objecthood became the internal motor animating photographic art. Because what makes photography photography – *according to the Orthodox account* – calls into question its standing as art, it is the natural site for this showdown today. None of this follows, of course, if one does not share Fried’s basic modernist outlook, but in that case the competing claims simply pass one another by. But even from within Fried’s perspective, these claims would be put in question if any of the assumptions about the nature of photography underpinning Orthodoxy turned out to be mistaken.³⁵ And they do.

³⁴ Compare Michaels’s remarks on the photographic image being as close to a fossil as a picture of a fossil in “Photographs and Fossils,” 435-6, and 440n. Michaels is excellent on Barthes and Fried, but everything he says about Walton is better said of Scruton. Photographs may be “transparent” for Walton but, unlike Scruton, but they are still a kind of picture. The paper is called “Transparent *Pictures*.” For Walton photographs are *both* pictures and traces; for Scruton transparency entails invisibility. See Walton, “On Pictures and Photographs: Objections Answered,” in R Allen & M Smith (eds.), *Film Theory and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 60-75. On the distinction between “skeptical” and “non-skeptical” Orthodoxy, see “Transparency and its Critics” in *On Photography*.

³⁵ What follows is the outline of an argument developed more fully in “What’s So New about the ‘New’ Theory of Photography?” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (75: 4, 2017). The origins of this argument can be traced, via Wilson (née Phillips), in “Responding to Scruton’s Scepticism,” back to Patrick Maynard’s account of photography as a branching family of technologies for marking surfaces through the agency of light in *The Engine of Visualisation:*

Perhaps the key respect in which they are mistaken concerns the conditions required for a photograph to come into existence. It is standardly assumed that a photograph comes into existence when a light sensitive surface is exposed to light. This is why the photographer's agency is, on this view, strictly speaking external to what makes a process photographic; it is not internal to the *formation* of the image itself. In the typically brief, but nonetheless decisive, moment in which information from the scene is being recorded, the photographer's beliefs, intentions, and desires are irrelevant; what determines what will show up in the final image is what was in fact before the camera, in conjunction with lighting, film stock, camera variables and so on, applied. But this foundational assumption – as common to folk theory as it is to Orthodoxy proper – turns out, on inspection, to be false.

In the case of analogue photography, exposing the film to light creates a latent image, but the film needs to be processed before that image becomes visible. Open the camera back in a misguided attempt to see the image, prior to processing, and all one will succeed in doing is fogging the film. Moreover, if the film in question is negative or colour reversal, it not only needs to be processed; it also has to be printed before it can be appreciated by anyone other than a specialist lab technician – and then only with respect to technical variables such as

Thinking through Photography (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1987). It has been developed in more or less restrictive ways by Paloma Atencia-Linares, “Fiction, Non-Fiction, and Deceptive Photographic Representation,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (70: 1, 2012) and Lopes, in *The Four Arts of Photography: An Essay in Philosophy* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2016). For an overview see “Aesthetic Scepticism and its Critics” in *On Photography*.

exposure, density, saturation and the like. In the case of digital photography, exposing the camera's CCD sensor to light causes the capacitors that make up its surface to transmit electrical charges; but the charged or uncharged state of those capacitors not only needs to be recorded in binary form, the resulting code has to be fed through several stages of software processing before it will generate a visible image. This process, though too quick to be humanly detected, nonetheless comprises distinct stages that can be distinguished both functionally and conceptually: output the same code through a different set of algorithms and it need not generate an image file. Processed differently, the same strings of 0s and 1s could be output as sound, and this shows there is a distinction to be drawn between the information stored and the algorithms required to output that information in visual form. In neither the analogue nor the digital case is a photograph generated simply by exposing a light sensitive surface to light. More is required.

Why does this matter? It matters, for philosophy and theory of photography alike, because it means that the photographer can invest his or her agency in any of the stages necessary for the production of an image that can be visually appreciated, and have what he or she thereby does still count as strictly photographic. Since neither the formation of a light image on camera's film plain or sensor, nor the recording of a momentary state of that light image are, even taken together, sufficient to generate a photograph – if that requires something amenable to visual appreciation – then any subsequent stage of image processing, without which there could be no image, must be internal to photography *stricto sensu*. If one cannot generate a photograph *without* such means, they can hardly be incidental to photography proper. Consider standard darkroom practices or digital post-production in this light; these *can*, but *need not*, be automated; indeed for much of photography's history neither was. And when they are not – which is to say, when a photographer chooses to invest his or her agency in the rendering stage

of the photographic process, then the photographer can exert as much or as a little – strictly photographic – control over detail as he or she likes. There is nothing epochal about digital processing in this regard, for all the millennialism that greeting its widespread uptake by artists some quarter century ago. In sum: there is, and never has been, any *peculiarly photographic* problem of detail. Instead, we might say, a certain picture held us captive. It seems that at least Jeff Wall agrees.³⁶

³⁶ My epigraph is taken from a discussion between Wall and Demand; Wall is disputing Demand's observation that his (Wall's) photographs are full of detail. More fully: "I don't think that there are details in photographs... there is no detail in photography, there's only focus – because once there is a focal plain, given a certain resolution of the film and lens and so on everything in it is sharp. Therefore what's a detail? There is no detail, everything in it [the focal plain] is the same." See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=07Uu_TQPORk, at 27.55.