

THE FECUNDITY OF THE FIGURAL:  
ETHICAL AND PHOTOTEXTUAL  
DI-VISION IN POSTMODERN  
AMERICAN FICTION

by

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Abstract

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This study contends that sites of the phototextual—that is, narrative works that employ as their chief structural basis any photographic disposition, such as, for example, tangible portraiture and/or a literary styling that implements photographic properties or theory—may be the ideal way to encounter, experience, and respect active (meta)physical exchanges between the Self and Other in the temporal spaces of postmodern American fiction and beyond. By engaging with a pluralistic ethical paradigm comprised from the thought of philosophers like Levinas, Barthes, Derrida, Badiou, and Irigaray, this dissertation examines an array of American phototexts ascribed to the postmodern epoch. Thusly, this very pluralistic inclusivity—operating meta-ethically—is responsible to both a proximity and a difference, and such divergent visions, the traces of such di-visions, inform this analytic with the phototextual. Ultimately, it is through the lens of such aforementioned thinkers, that I posit these phototexts act as the premier ethical conduit for responsibility to the Other, even in spite of the eruptive tendencies rendered by events such as 9/11, thus concluding that such visually-anchored literary discourses can offer both a present and futural ethical model spanning any cultural milieu.

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## Chapter 1

### The Conveyance of a 'Said/Saying' into a 'Seen/Seeing' Unity:

#### Towards a Pluralistic Ethical Framework

the age of clairvoyance is precisely one in which a certain 'sight' has vanished, where saying and seeing have entered into a communal space without distance and without connection.

-Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*

#### The Argument

In order to head off any naysayer's discussion of this project's aims as appearing oblique or obscure, opening with a bit of blunt language may be advantageous. In short, this work argues that a consistent and intentional framework of pluralistic ethics is at work inside chief postmodern American literary-photographic texts. This project also argues that what unites and connects these postmodern American works is, in the Levinasian sense primarily, not only what is Said, but the manner in which they do the Saying: *through* photography; and it is through these various photographic 'systems,' in both verbal and visual language renderings, that operate as the principal vehicle for conveying and engaging in these ethical experiences with the Other. This study also proposes that photographic mediums may be the best way to encounter, experience, and respect the (meta)physical cross-border exchanges between the Self and the Other in our geographical and temporal space, despite the supposed cleft rendered by the 9/11 event. Or, to phrase it in another way: I argue that photography, and its related 'parts,' act as the premier ethical conduit for this specific literary place and epoch. Thus, by examining some exemplary American texts in the decades leading up to 9/11, as well as some post-



9/11 works that still employ this same photo-ethical framework, this study will show that the ethical encounter is still possible today, is still quite recoverable, and can still remain a solid, futural standard regardless of any large-scale evental trauma.

Additionally, I wish to express my assurances that careful and complete nomenclatural clarifications are not too far off. We will think rigorous thoughts *together*<sup>1</sup>, and in doing so, the explanations and explorations of terminology—often quite contested—will concurrently appear on the horizon. This is terminology that comes from across the disciplines of ethical and metaphysical philosophy, photographic theory, and postmodern literary criticism—in fact, these early categories themselves already seem present as potentially troubling terms! But what do I even mean by a “pluralistic ethics?” And what is meant by the “literary-photographic text,” or in its more abbreviated form, as it will appear throughout this project: the “phototext” and “phototextual?” While a long-form explication of this idea will definitely play out over the course of this dissertation, I offer the following explanation, even if somewhat injudicious in its brevity: the phototext, as I will employ it, is a literary text that uses as its chief structural basis any photographic predisposition, whether as tangible imagistic renderings themselves (such as, say, the humanistic portrait), or a literary styling that implements photographic properties, such as central characters who are photographers, narratives that converse in photographic theory, and/or engagements between characters and readers about such technical or artistic photographic knowledge. What is the critical pedigree of such a word? In his seminal book, *Picture Theory* (a title with such a delightful, and relevant, double-handed

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<sup>1</sup> As Jean-Luc Nancy states in *Being Singular Plural*, “philosophy is, in sum, the thinking of being-with; because of this, it is also thinking-with as such” (31). In other words, the examination of ontological—and pre-ontological—discourse need not, or *must* not, be undertaken alone. Relatedly, in his book *on Nancy and the sensibility of touch*, Derrida states that “we never give in to just ‘anything whatever:’ rigor is de rigueur” (7). Rigor, in such matters, is strictly mandatory. Thus, a *collective* rigor: this sits very well with me.

meaning in the word “picture,” working as both a verb and a noun here), WJT Mitchell employs the term “imagetext” (89) to explore what Ari Blatt, in turn, has adequately dubbed the “aesthetic border crossing” between the “intersemiotic cross-fertilization” of image and text (108). But Mitchell also stresses how his phrasing differs from rendering such an idea as either “image/text” or “image-text,” for the former implies too harsh an irruptive separation and the latter as something far too relational as to not be co-imblicated (89). Moreover, Blatt again asserts that phototextual fictions that

capitalize on the commingling of the verbal and the visual to address larger issues that are crucial to our understanding of the ontology of the photographic image, such as photography’s relationship to time, memory, death, authenticity, history, reality, and the imagination. (120)

do much to speak towards and of the reciprocity between photography and literature. However, Blatt fails to address in this reciprocity—itsself a very ideal ethical construction—how such phototextualities operate in developing and understanding relationships towards the Other.<sup>2</sup> Blatt mentions the ontology of the photographic, but how does the phototextual work in comprehending the ontology of the ethical encounter? This dissertation relies on such line of inquiry as its foundation.

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<sup>2</sup> I should also hasten to add here that I employ the word “phototext” a bit differently than the way its related form is retained by editors Alex Hughes and Andrea Noble in their anthology *Phototextualities: Intersections of Photography and Narrative* (University of New Mexico Press, 2003). While that omnibus does contain a wonderful and diverse group of essays that are indeed “driven by a will to engage with and build on preexistent theoretical debates on photographic signification” (15), the essays draw from a multidisciplinary field of study, thereby imbuing the intertextuality-ness of photography and narrative as something primarily of a ‘genre-spanning’ practice. Furthermore, just as a portion of the essays in *Phototextualities* contend to explore “the tensions intrinsic in mixed media works [and] the complexities of the image/text dynamic” (3), my project uses the term more similarly in this latter context, yet is also something even more explicitly Derridean, I suppose, in that the play of such a word-coupling *neographism* may be the ‘best’ way to illuminate the ethical, or rather the *meta*-ethical, in *any* text.

Furthermore, my own study is solely comprised and concerned with phototexts that are classified in the genre of long-form fiction: the novel.<sup>3</sup> In short, the novels contained in this study vary in their uses and degrees of photography, but *all* are phototexts. For example, Don DeLillo's *Mao II* has at its core a central character who is a professional photojournalist and artistic photographer and who discusses and displays her craft throughout the narrative; additionally, DeLillo's chapters are headed by photographs, all that are signposted throughout the plot in a meaningful and relevant way. Other works still, like Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* rely heavily on actual visual images themselves—the novel contains a total sixty-three pages of photographs or other visual imagery, “perhaps as a measure of the significance visual content enacts within...thereby supporting the argument that its images contribute more than should be disregarded” (Watkins 108). Finally, this study will look at purely realized phototextual displays by portraitists Richard Avedon and Richard Renaldi. Such strictly visual works shall serve as ancillary phototexts that buttress their literary-novelistic phototextual counterparts. But in conjunction with the working-towards of a more lucid demarcation of *what* a phototext *is*, this study will simultaneously examine *how* such phototexts, in their phototextuality, exist as leading exemplars for engaging *with-in* ethical discourse to the Other as other.

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<sup>3</sup> Though there certainly exists a breadth of short-form fiction that I would classify as phototextual in their dealings in the way characters engage with the co-creation of the image—see Raymond Carver's well-known short stories “Viewfinder” and “Cathedral” for two prime examples. Moreover, there is also a wide range of *non-fiction*, essayistic phototextual examples, of which one of the best, and earliest, would probably be photographer Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), which contains accompanying text by the writer James Agee. Funded by the Farms Security Administration as part of a New Deal project that gave rise to other famous photographic projects, such as those by Robert Capa and Margaret Bourke-White, Evans and Agee's “photo-essay book,” as Jae Emerling dubs it in *Photography: History and Theory* (83), covers the plight of Depression-era sharecroppers through both image and narrative expression.

Now, to turn to the topic of another term in this project's title: what am I implying of this strange transcription, "di-vision." What does such a textual performance *mean*? Divided differences yet proximities of vision, of *envisioning*? Or what of the division between various theorists themselves: Sontag and Barthes read by Azoulay; Levinas read by Badiou and Irigaray—do not such 'conflicting' readings illustrate the idea of pluralistic ethics? *Touching* on the importance of a unified *Seeing* of a closeness with-in a dividing difference of that very *Seen*—this is the reasoning for such syntactic play. Indeed, one of the central goals this study will task itself with is to demonstrate the variable, viable ethical paradigm(s) with which to read selected postmodern American fiction. And what unites these texts is, of course, the implementation of a photographic *topos*, a network of tropes that take many forms, but that are all linked with an overarching photographic spirit. Indeed, while the ethical frameworks feel varied and *appear* to operate in a sort of progressive manner, one thinker or line of thought is not meant to seem 'superior' to another in terms of its rigor and/or thrust. Rather, in each chapter, the philosophers and phototexts are presented in a certain tactical order so that they each built off and out from the ripples of each other's thought. 'Di-vision' speaks to this difference of *vision*, yet the hyphenated make-up aligns to this relation; here, I differ from Mitchell and his aversion to the hyphen, for the idea is to maintain both a proximity and a difference, and the hyphen achieves such a meta-ethical influence for my purposes.

Relatedly, what of other phrases like those in the title of this chapter, 'speaking' of the Levinasian concept of the *Said* and the *Saying* as building towards a transference to integration of the *Seen* and the *Seeing*? Alongside other ethical philosophers like Levinas and Derrida, Alain Badiou, and his concepts explored in *Being and Event*, and Luce Irigaray, especially her more remote works *The Way of Love* and *Sharing the*

*World*, shall also play an integral role in the following study; and just as the preface to *The Way of Love* self-consciously positions it (Levinas does something similar in his preface to *Totality and Infinity*), first, as a conversation with Heidegger by being a “book [that] is in search of gestures, including gestures in language, which could help on the way to nearness, and in order to cultivate it” (ix); but then *beyond* Heidegger, Irigaray also adds that she “would like to add another voice, that of the reader with whom I try to hold a dialogue” (ix). Thus, so too does my own present work attempt to heed a similarly magnanimous and benevolent guidance, and in holding this conversation, hopes for a working towards the disclosure of related and codified terminologies with an effervescence and faithful luminosity.

#### ‘The Ethicality of Ethics’

Within the opening pages of his first book, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, Simon Critchley speaks about ethics in direct relation to the meta-ethical:

one must not simply ‘do’ ethics in the usual sense of the word; one must first engage in a deconstructive analysis of ‘l’éthicalité de l’éthique’ [the ethicality of ethics] or, in Nietzschean terms, a calling into question of the value of values. (16)

Nearly two decades later, Critchley will revisit this same notion in the introduction to *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*; in an even more transparent proclamation, Critchley writes:

my overall argument can be broken down into the meta-ethical and normative parts. I understand meta-ethics to be inquiry into the nature of ethics and what makes ethics the thing that it is, i.e. what makes ethics ethical. (9)

Critchley’s decades-strong vigor and persistence is admirable, for engaging in such manners of fecund inquiry not only maintains the perpetuation of an ethics, but also the larger importance of discursive thinking: there is robust intellectual worth in perpetuating

a thinking-about-thinking, in a thinking-awareness. I proffer this initial, conceptual model as something of an opening stratagem. Moreover, consider this pattern of thought in the additional two examples, presented as such to bolster my insistence for this importance of thinking in regards to the point of meta-thought: first, an opening excerpt from Jacques Derrida's *Adieu: To Emmanuel Levinas* and, secondly, some additional words from the preface of Irigaray's *The Way of Love*.

Firstly, on December 27<sup>th</sup>, 1995, at the massive Pantin cemetery on the outskirts of Paris, in close proximity to the lifeless body of Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida spoke of an infinite separation engendered by the infinite interruption of death:

I cannot speak of interruption without recalling, like many among you, no doubt, the anxiety of interruption I could feel in Emmanuel Levinas when, on the telephone, for example, he seemed at each moment to fear being cut off, to fear the silence or disappearance, the "without-response," of the other, to whom he called out and held on with an "allo, allo" between each sentence, sometimes even in mid-sentence. (9)

Derrida's words here are more than just a heartrending eulogy for his late mentor, interlocutor, and friend; they are a *vision* into the ethical, the metaphysical, and philosophical discourse as a whole. While I will take up this question much more carefully in Chapter Five with the works of Irigaray, what happens when the conversations cease, when the questions become unaskable, forgotten, relegated to the dusty corners of a stagnant inquiry, or at worst even, categorically ignored? Levinas's acknowledgement of the "without-response," the devastating prospects found in a *silencing of the other* (not to be confused, of course, with sharing a silence *with* the other), remains a potentiality linked inextricably to ethics, and to broader metaphysical dialogues.

Certainly, Derrida's preceding thoughts usher a sense of his impetus here when, also in the "Eulogy" portion of *Adieu*, he cites the work of Levinas's other great confident and colleague, Maurice Blanchot. In the context of commenting on Levinas's *Totality*

*and Infinity*, Blanchot spoke of the act of thought in philosophy as designed to (re)steer a rethinking of thought itself; “we must not despair of philosophy,” Blanchot wrote and it is Levinas’ *Totality and Infinity* which involved a

putting back into question, as we must, our ways of thinking...we are called upon to become responsible for what philosophy essentially is, by welcoming, in all the radiance and infinite exigency proper to it, the idea of the Other. (qtd. in Derrida 8-9)

What we must garner here is Blanchot’s inquisition into ‘a thinking about thinking,’ here relayed by Derrida at Levinas’s memorial, in addition to how this meta-thought weaves itself through the entire ethical project. Such reflective, reflexive kind of thought *is* ethical for it demands levels of significant and mindful responsibility.

Secondly, in her 2002 preface to *The Way of Love*, Irigaray herself addresses the ever-present issues of translating in moving from the French to the English edition of the book (interestingly, the ‘sequel,’ *Sharing the World*, she wrote directly into English). For those familiar with *The Way of Love* in both languages, Irigaray implores her readers to really concentrate on the poetics of the words rather than the translation “errors,” and that the material translation itself represents the very ethical philosophy she is interested in interrogating:

In order to talk to the other, to listen to the other, to hold a dialogue between us, we have to again find an artistic, musical, touchful way of speaking or saying and of listening able to be perceived in the written text, then not reduced to a simple assistance for remembering meaning or to some code to be respected...this English translation of *La Voie de l’amour* certainly would not been possible without each of us respecting the other in their difference(s). No doubt such a gesture is the first step on the way of love (xx-xxi).

Irigaray’s earlier work is often perceived as a non-conciliatory, and sometimes an even outright contentious, foil to the thought of Levinas, though as my own project will work to divulge over the coming chapters, her readings only *advance* the ethical discourse. But in *The Way of Love*, and the above Preface excerpt, Irigaray moves both within and

beyond Heidegger's truth-poetics to show how they take priority over the codes and temporary shelter of concrete, translatable language, and thus it is via these poetics that we can—to borrow an added Heideggerean metaphor—work our way down the path to the dwelling in the clearing of the trees of enlightened revelation. Throughout the whole of that text, Irigaray's lush and lyrical thought employs a more nuanced (and methodologically delineated: the book's four sections essentially correspond to four 'stages' for building a permanent dwelling), critique of ethical difference, but this wholly tangible example of the translatable, material book itself is an early first lesson in the power of self-reflexive thought. And, as she asserts, this awareness leads to respect, a respect, that if absent, could not have brought her work to light: *this* is ethics, *this is* ethics.

Again, these marvelous thinkers, and several others, will all function in important roles within this study, and the larger goal here with these two brief sketches is, again, merely to illustrate how the broader philosophic discourse operates in a self-reflexive, meta-discursive modus; such an establishment is mandatory *a priori* to any discussion of photography and fiction, to the phototext. The complex relationship between Derrida and Levinas—through their direct essays on/towards one another, along with other complimentary secondary analyses of their associations by critics like Simon Critchley who appreciate the “double-handed” manner of their engagement—will be thoroughly explored in due time, but this somewhat bittersweet anecdotal example from Levinas's funeral operates both practically and initially. Also, such is similarly implied in my above selection from Irigaray's preface—her conversational set-up will find a scrupulous strengthening momentarily (for Irigaray's compelling feminist critique of and then expansion to Levinas is a key piece of this larger ethical puzzle), but I'd assert now that her early use *of* ethical language to situate a conversation *on* ethical language is also



quite deliberate. Indeed, these concise instances do double duty too: they serve to segue into more focused conversations out of ontologically-based query to a distinct philosophic inquest *with-in* ethics. Really, whether it is through Blanchot's ruminations on one of Levinas's ethical masterworks, or Irigaray's insistence on Heideggerean truth-disclosing poetics with the Other, these glosses not only indicate how meta-discursive and an infinitely looped referentiality maintains an inseparable relationship to metaphysical thought, but that such level of thought involves the dominion of ethics. And astride Critchley's lucid recognitions, these examples remind us that vigorous philosophical discourse excels in conjunction with such meta-deliberation. Thusly, this meta-construction in using the introductory remarks of others to engender my own preliminary observations is, admittedly, also part of an opening gambit regarding the ethical encounter.

Now, in transferring from these ideas of meta-ethics' intrinsic place around ethics, it is necessary to move, for it too is inextricably related, to a discussion regarding the ethical tradition from the mid-twentieth to early twenty-first centuries, especially if this project hopes to make but the tiniest of splashes in this steadily flowing philosophical continuum by attaching ethical 'meaning' to the artistic medium of photography. Indeed, by again invoking this joining to the meta-ethical, there is a desired goal to be found in the idea that examining this temporal pedigree *is* ethical itself. Acknowledging these ethical forebears, while not only allowing for an important reacquainting (and re-reading?) of their individual thought, works as a schema granting a broader understanding in how these thinkers collectively and collaboratively converse with one another and, in turn, allows for my own entrance to the congress by implementing a pluralistic ethical framework.

### A Pluralism With-in Oscillation

In an article on Alain Badiou's somewhat systematic thoughts on ethics, philosopher Peter Dews offers a brief, though astute, summary of this relatively recent critical tradition, the so-called 'ethical turn,' or 'turn to ethics.' While Dews is not foolhardy enough as to assign a specific date for this swing, he alludes to the "unmistakable sense of exhilaration in the air" during the late 1960s and early 1970s' and the ascension of post-structuralist and postmodern theory (107). Such an identification also corresponds to the general premise of Critchley's first book, elicited earlier, and how the rise of deconstructive criticism goes hand-in-glove with ethics. Or, the rise of ethics goes with deconstruction; or, even more accurately, perhaps: both rise simultaneously in an interlacing and bi-lateral fashion. My study concurs with this very latter sentiment and also argues that the rise of photography—as possibly the quintessential postmodern artistic medium, as "maybe *the* perfect postmodern vehicle" (116) as Linda Hutcheon once notably exclaimed in *The Politics of Postmodernism*—operates under the same ethical guidelines for engaging and experiencing the Other across the topographies of postmodern American literature leading up to *and* following 9/11. For clarity's sake, I would assert that this turn to ethics corresponds symbiotically with a turn to photography, specifically portraiture. For portrait photography primarily deals in the interactions between entities, about the active exchange of language to produce *something*, a Said image that demonstrates in it, the traces of a Saying image-making process.

So, even though Dews's discussion primarily examines Badiou's longish essay *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, Dews first distinguishes the sort of polarity existent within the wider ethical pool, or as he aptly calls it: "the domain of inquiry that oscillates unstably" (107). This is a troubling finding, though perhaps not surprising: a field that advocates responsibility and engagement between subject and its Other seems

to harbor philosophic disagreements, begetting even points of volatility. While Dews is clearly interested in probing Badiou's ethical constructions—which are somewhat of 'outlier' ethical positions, as we will see later in Chapter Four, and that are based on processes of 'truths,' of a loving fidelity, formulated out of handling the 'situationally' (ontologically) profound 'event'—he concludes again with a reference to the larger dialogue:

I began by evoking the oscillation of recent cultural criticism between an exuberant assertion of *pluralistic fragmentation* and a renewed awareness...of the constraints of ethical obligations. I suggested that this alternation could itself be seen as an index of the moral situation of the present. (118, emphasis mine)

Badiou, he seems to say, offers a kind of 'third alternative,' by combining the two 'extremes' of the oscillation, thus avoiding just "patiently thinking through this impasse, [he] seeks to resolve it by a *coup de force*" (118), or a militancy. Subsequently, Christopher Norris, in his orderly reading of Badiou's great opus, *Being and Event*, alludes to a similar innovativeness, claiming that Badiou "stands firmly apart from all those movements in recent French or French-influenced philosophy and critical theory [and] rejects this whole line of thinking" that blooms and emits outwards from "Levinas's strict regard for the absolute otherness (or radical alterity of the other person as that which constitutes the basis of any ethics meriting that name" (31-32). But it is Dews, again, that undeniably identifies the aforesaid vacillation, which appears as an almost hypocritical division in ethical philosophy (also curious is Dews's identification of Badiou's goals as something akin to a forceful, even hostile, takeover), though he concludes that Badiou's "*fidelity* to this participation is now read as ethical, but is not susceptible to any independent assessment of its validity, to any mediation" (118). Still, it is Badiou, in writing towards the end of the last century and the beginning of the current one, who may

represent the paradigmatic shift from ethics' deconstructive turn to something *else*, something political perhaps, but also something more globally realized.

I have chosen to expose this phase of my discussion with Dew's reading of Badiou because it demonstrates that even 'alternative' ethical models "can only *open the way* for new ethical responses" (118, emphasis in original). As it has been said, ethics, in and of itself, is meta-ethical; one cannot speak of any ethical scaffolding without examining the ethics in submitting to such said ethical framework. Thus, in exploring such discursive conversations on ethics, it appears mandatory to also bring other various thinkers into the fold. Therefore, it can be said that ethics is polyvocal on every level and at every turn: there are many voices thrust into the fray and *all* these voices matter. As Dew's implies, Badiou's ethics may be 'no better' than those discussed below, but they are just as significant as those of the preceding thinkers in leading us down the path to something of a disclosure, about ourselves and each other.

Naturally, this study of ethics will also thoroughly draw upon, and build out from, the important and still very pertinent contributions of the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. But an appropriate and relevant place to enter, perhaps, might be Levinas's thoughts regarding ethics and art: if Levinas's ethics involve the radical questioning of the Self in front of *the face* of the Other, how, asks Jill Robbins, does the work of art give access to the ethical, if at all (66)? Truly, what repercussions do Levinasian ethics exert in the territories of representation, or of the image, and more specifically still, of photography? Levinas's (perceived) iconoclasm is fairly well known, with the early essay "Reality and its Shadow," setting out to deconstruct "the sphere of intelligibility characterized by vision" (97). However, I think there is great worth in Phillippe Crignon's flat charge: "Levinas is in fact the only philosopher of modernity who did not share in the general enthusiasm for the arts, and in particular, for painting" (101). While my own

study only makes but the most cursory of gestures towards painting, Levinas's sentiments regarding art-at-large seem to make him a peculiar choice—am I permitted to pick-and-choose from Levinas's tenets, valorizing his metaphysical ethical frameworks while simultaneously panning his attitudes on art and aesthetics?

I think Crignon's re-reading is apropos in suggesting that Levinas's "fierce and unwavering iconoclas[m] leads us to suspect that he perceived, perhaps better than others, something considerable at stake in the image (101). I agree, yet would extend this claim to say that Levinas's hesitance for the image demonstrates *in itself* the clout and capabilities of images, for such 'power' need not be comprehended as an unethical imbalance or appropriation of alterity. Additionally, Nicola Foster reminds us that

Levinas's examples of images [in "Reality and its Shadow"] are works of art (painting, sculpture, music, novels, theatre), not photography. Had Levinas offered photographic examples would the examples *force* a slightly different account if attention were paid to the trace left by light? Conversely, might Levinas's account help us interpret photography differently? (82)

As Foster asserts, this "philosophical silence on photography" (78) certainly comes from photography's relatively early (or non-existent) status as a cultural icon contemporaneous to Levinas's own writings (though his essay did appear only two decades after Walter Benjamin's now canonical "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"), but I would hasten to add it also speaks to the medium's strong ability to most accurately engage with matters of temporality and reality, something that, say, painting or architecture can only partially address.

So, while never explicitly citing Levinas's ethical framework, Roland Barthes's groundbreaking *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* certainly grows out of this same central and unique strength manifested within photography. Photography embodies in it a proclivity to engage with multiple temporalities in the same instant (more on the Levinasian connection of the instant in a moment). But I will extend Foster's argument, of

which states most notably that Barthes begins an important conversation in indicating photography's ability to transcend language, such a transcendence that is a matter of which Levinas's later work is quite concerned. I propose to move beyond Foster to argue that the dialogical temperament of the Saying and the Said is actually something paradoxical, that it is both same and different, and that it eventually transfers into the Seeing and the Seen, an ethical relationship I'll develop as simultaneously visual and linguistic. If power is given, without question, to the other by artistic means—specifically, through photographic portraiture—then an ethical conjunction remains honored. Thus, I argue that the phototexts of this present study engage with the Other via a photo-ethical transcendence, and that a veritable “non-in-difference” that *speaks* to proximal difference grants an *indifference* towards/of any discrepancy.

I think a curious, almost aphoristic, sentence from the preface of *Totality and Infinity*, an important work I will explore more deeply in the following chapter, can act as another fine point of entry here; in the context of ethical relations leading to transcendence, Levinas claims in an oft-cited, stand-alone sentence: “already *of itself* ethics is an ‘optics’” (29, emphasis in original). Steven Crowell reads this as meaning “that my ethical response to my fellow human being is the *lens* through which all other philosophical questions must be addressed” (1). My own interpretation will build from the idea that ethics is certainly about *Saying*, yes, but that it is an optics because it operates as a *Seeing*. And according to Crowell, Levinas's use of such vision-laden language reinforces ethics as ‘first philosophy,’ for if we cannot ‘see’ the other ethically, then we cannot see ourselves in the consequent ontological sense. In other words, one needs someone else to exist ‘against’ in order to explain and feel and see their own existence; hence, as the ethical standard decrees, it behooves the Self to treat the Other with the utmost of loving respect and authentic care.

Moreover, in his introduction to *Totality and Infinity*, John Wild writes that: “totalitarian thinking accepts vision rather than language as its model. It aims to gain an all-inclusive, panoramic view of all things, including the other, in a neutral, impersonal light” (15). Of course, *Totality and Infinity* works towards the argument that encountering the other is to be found with-in the jurisdiction of language; Wild continues: “instead of referring to the panoramic sense of vision as its model for understanding, it refers to language where there is always room of the diversity of dialogue” (16). According to Levinas, it is language that is the only way to co-exist (to exist-alongside) with the other, yet still leave that otherness unbroken and unharmed; or “this means that I must be ready to put my world into words, and to offer it to the other” (14), as Wild’s introduction declares. This leads us to some of the other questions my own present work aims to interrogate: does photography and photographic allusion impede the exchange of language; does the capturing of a temporal instant vanquish the equity of linguistic exchange? Eric Severson, in a recent book, looks at, among other things, Levinas’s “philosophy of the instant” and how Levinas made the instant analogous to captivity and powerlessness (50). Thusly, can we not reconcile visual figuration with ethical responsibility if representation has always-already temporally missed its originative moment? Perhaps the answer *begins* in realigning our thinking, as Levinas himself does in his final masterwork *Otherwise than Being*, to view ourselves, in our obsession with our responsibilities to the other, as the subject of this subjectivity thrown back onto itself, where we become the “hostages” to our obligations and responsibilities to the Other (112). Ergo: what if this originative moment of responsibility *is* the arresting photo-ethical language of the text? Such notions of responsibility and hospitality, rendered as the servitude of *being* hostage to the phototextually traced Other, comprise the bulk of Chapter Three.

While I do not disagree with Levinas's assessment, nor Wild's ample introductory reading, I also do not think that they fully account for the concept of the language of vision, or even the vision of language. Indeed, *ethics is an optics* but, as Levinas continues in the *Totality and Infinity* preface, "it is a 'vision' without image, bereft of synoptic and totalizing objectifying virtues of vision" (23); that is, ethics' central outlook—as embodied by his extremely notable concept of the *visage*, or "the face," a main focus of Chapter Two—cannot be carried out by visual signification but instead by the means of expressive language. Levinas's "Expression and Image" section in *Totality and Infinity's* concluding chapter confirms similar thinking on this point:

the presence of the Other, or expression, source of all signification, is not contemplated as an intelligible essence, but is heard as language, and thereby is effectuated exteriorly. Expression, of the face, overflows images, which are always immanent to my thought, as though they came from me. (297)

Therefore, even by the concluding section at the end of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas's language still seems interestingly loaded with visual metaphor in every corner. Perhaps this is an example of what Martin Jay first observed in his book, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, noting that Levinas may actually well exemplify the paradoxical, and often bafflingly frustrating, proclivities of postmodernism: "the hypertrophy of the visual, at least in one of its modes, and its denigration" (qtd. in Rosen 369). As if a sort of counterpart to the grand Barthesian co-presence in photographic affect, symbolized by the famous classifications, discussed more in Chapter Two, of the *studium* (denoting the cultural interpretations of a photograph) and the *punctum* (the powerful and personal wounding, or puncturing, characteristic in a photograph), so too is Levinas's penultimate work conceivably marked with a similar variety of bi-directional utterance: a need to recognize the ever-growing,



even inflated, importance of the visual while tearing down its newly flourishing pull with the same stroke.

Moving back much further into Levinas's canon, we eventually (re)turn to the well-known essay "Reality and its Shadow," where Levinas reserves his most reproachful words about the visual arts (that is, mostly painting and sculpture). In introducing the essay itself for *The Levinas Reader*, Sean Hand calls it "Levinas's most controversial application of ethical responsibility to the field of aesthetics" (129); furthermore, Aaron Rosen says it is with this work that "Levinas offers his most sustained and harshest comments on visual art" (366). However, it is quite important, especially in a project such as mine that hopes to wed ethics ethically to American fiction and photography, to scrutinize Levinas's specific appearances on visual art *through* this essay, because I argue that Levinas's assessments of art here are often misread as being a wholesale rejection of visuality. I speak more at length about this essay in Chapters Two and Three where I trace a connection to two phototextual novels by Richard Powers, but some initial thoughts need inviting in here. I tend to align myself with critics like Henry McDonald who suggest that: "it is true that Levinas characterized art in "negative" terms...but what some critics and theorists have failed to appreciate is that such descriptions do not "disparage" aesthetics but are part of a critique of the dominant modern tradition *of* aesthetics" (440). This is an attitude also shared by Ludwig Nagl, who claims that:

the vain and self-complacent 'artistic idoltry' that Levinas finds dangerous due to its seductive avoidance of the other is characteristic of depraved forms of aesthetic experience. [Levinas's] warning counts only 'for art *separated* from the criticism that integrates the inhuman work of the artist into the human world.' (30)

The reason why I find these explanation appealing, for one, is that it aligns to my opening points of meta-awareness in engagement: just as ethics study what makes the ethical *ethical*, aesthetical evaluations of the aesthetic make up the field of aesthetics; this, too,

in a way brings such ideas into line with Jay's allegation of Levinas-as-*proto*-postmodernist (and Critchley's view of Levinas as *proto*-deconstructionist?). For to read Levinas as 'rejecting' art indiscriminately is a misunderstanding of his radically ethical and deconstructive encounter with visual representation.

Furthermore, McDonald portends that Levinas's thoughts about art do not reflect an ontological "beyond," or counter-language, but that they instead reflect his ethical notion of alterity or otherness (440). Not surprisingly then, one might ask, is this not the *ethical* way to read "Reality and Its Shadow?" After all, in the essay itself, Levinas reaches a conclusion that

the task of criticism remains essential...but we cannot here broach the 'logic' of the philosophical exegesis of art; that would demand a broadening of the intentionally limited perspective of the relation with the other without which being could not be told in its reality, that is, in its time. (143)

Levinas resolutely restricts his argument over the recognized awareness that such an expansion would therein shade or obfuscate the other-perspective, and hence exist as nothing more than an unethical quarrel. Speculating on, or envisaging, the motivations and thoughtful inspirations extricated from artistic works may indeed thrust entities into insincerity, into a severe inauthenticity that diminishes the face-to-face; however, *envisioning* artistic endeavors—and specifically those of photographic portraiture where a human element, a human face is an essential formal property—as ethical 'artifacts' in themselves can engender true, transcendental experiences *through* the face. And in portrait photography, the fecundity of the exegesis is paramount: the act of co-creating art, involving the collaboration of two (or more) physical entities, must be critically broached, must be given to temporal analysis; Chapter Five explores such co-creative matters. So, like Crignon, like McDonald, like Foster, and others, my own study ambles down but one path to a possible clearing in this specific regard, in continuation of the

conversation began here by Levinas, in exploring a bit deeper the relatedness of this aforementioned 'logic' propagated outward, starting from "Reality and its Shadow."

As I alluded to, this study will use throughout elements of the chief Levinasian archetype of *the face* to examine ethical exteriority in the American postmodern phototext, but some preliminary ideas should be introduced now. *Totality and Infinity* is principally where Levinas defines (and refines) his ideas on the face *and* vision. Rudimentarily speaking, the face is what engenders, addresses, and imposes responsibility-for-others. Also, as Richard A. Cohen writes in the introduction to *Ethics and Infinity*, a collection of interviews between Levinas and Phillippe Nemo, it is *in* the "excessive immediacy of the face-to-face" that exists the only alterity which is "sufficiently other to provoke response, to subject the subject to the subjection of response" (12). This so-called 'metaphysical facial zone' is the supreme (in both the mortal and immortal senses of the word, I think) site for genuine, authentic other-interaction. But in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas opens the dialogue, as he often does, by posing some rich rhetorical questions: "is not the face given to vision? How does the epiphany as a face determine a relationship different from that which characterizes all our sensible experience" (187)? And according to Levinas, vision, as a synthetic façade and counter to the face, is endowed by art, which places an object on exhibition, only to be *seen* in a one-way (and therefore violent, harmful, unethical) non-bilateral fashion. This façade "captivates by its grace as by magic, but does not reveal itself," Levinas concludes in his first major section on the face, but

if the transcendent cuts across sensibility, if it is openness preeminently, if its vision is the vision of the very openness of being...it is the face; its revelation is speech. The relation with the Other alone introduces a dimension of transcendence. (193)

Vision is authentic then *if* it transcends sensory experiences to access the sites of open being via relations with the Other. If "speech cuts across vision" (195) as Levinas later

writes in the “Ethics and the Face” chapter of *Totality and Infinity*, then where does this place the figural *conversation with-in* portrait photography? How does the language of vision and, (to a lesser extent?) the vision of language, operate in the face-to-face of portrait making, especially since Levinas maintains the conception of the face as unassociated with the literal physiognomy of a person?

Benda Hofmeyr urges that Levinas’s encounter with the other coincides with the “epiphany of the face,” that the face corresponds and consists in a manifestation of God; and in order to “embody” an expression of this nature and magnitude, the face clearly cannot be reduced to a person’s facial expression (2). In order to better articulate this notion at work in a literary, phototextual manner, it may be worth citing a complete scene from Don DeLillo’s novel *Mao II*, a text which I will closely revisit in Chapter Three. The brief context here is the photographer-character Brita first visiting the home of the reclusive writer-character Bill in order to take his portrait (this particular tête-à-tête begins with Bill speaking):

“When a writer doesn’t show his face, he becomes a local symptom of God’s famous reluctance to appear.”

“But this is intriguing to many people.”

“It’s also taken as an awful sort of arrogance.”

“But we’re drawn to the idea of remoteness. A hard-to-reach place is necessarily beautiful, I think. Beautiful and a little sacred maybe. And a person who becomes inaccessible has a grace and a wholeness the rest of us envy.”

“The image world is corrupt, here is a man who hides his face.”

“Yes,” she said.

“People may be intrigued by this figure but they also resent him and mock him and want to dirty him up and watch his face distort in shock and fear when the concealed photographer leaps out of the trees. In a mosque, no images. In our world we sleep and eat the image and pray

to it and wear it too. The writer who won't show his face is encroaching on holy turf. He's playing God's own trick."

"Maybe he's just shy, Bill."

Through the viewfinder she watched him smile. He looked clearer in the camera. He had an intentness of gaze, an economy, and his face was handsomely lined and worked, embroidered across the forehead and at the corners of the eyes. So often in her work the human shambles was remade by the energy of her seeing, by the pure will that the camera uncovered in her, the will to see deeply (36-37).

What adds complexity to this scene is the double-handed (to transitorily appropriate Critchley's terminology) citation of the face, in both the literal (i.e. bodily) *and* metaphysical sense. In DeLillo's fictive context, the cloistered artist who is faceless represents God's averseness because as one who shuts themselves off to any other-engagement via the face-to-face exchange, they become alone, in all forms. As Brita prods Bill further on this idea, we see more Levinasian metaphysical composition akin to the principles furthered in "Reality and its Shadow:" Brita imagines the inaccessible hermit as having grace and Bill seems to agree, and assert that it is the image-making world that is helping to forge this non-sacred inauthenticity. Of course the capital irony here is, the two reach a face-to-face, transcendental moment (*zenithed through* the mediation of the camera's viewfinder, no less) in their insistence on the inauthenticity of the image. Authenticity uncovered through the hyperawareness of the shackles of (an) inauthenticity. It is such paradoxical, 'postmodernist' visions of the face-to-face that my following study is interested in interrogating.

Indeed, during this portraiture session, Brita and Bill speak *of* God and this clarity stimulates *something*. Relatedly, Alphonso Lingis in discussing Levinas's final masterwork, *Otherwise than Being*, asserts that Levinas:

no doubt divinizes the relationship with alterity...he rather means to locate the proper meaning of God—the one God—in the ethical bond. Not so much that God would be a postulate required to render the ethical

imperative intelligible, nor that God would be revealed in ethical phenomena—but that God is the very nonphenomenal force of the other, that God “exists” in his voice, which speaks the ethical imperative. (xxxix)

Brita and Bill don’t “see” or “experience” a typically understood God in the above scene, but their coming together, their conversation—by means of the photographic imperative, *because* of it—allows them to enter into an ethical arrangement, and that that in it self *is* (a) God. The narrative informs readers that Bill looks clearer in the camera, that Brita’s vision culminates into a pure will by means of an ‘uncovering;’ we are open to *feeling* a transcendence, and an entrance of something purely divine.

From this, then, we might ask: how does one even move to initiate an engagement with the (photographic) face? Can the sensibility of Levinas’s Said and Saying associate with the sensibility of something I analogously render as the Seen and Seeing? The answer to that first question, though, for Levinas, is by language, of course, and by *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas reaches the pinnacle of his articulations on the language of ethical interaction. But, in relation to that second query, how do visual forms—specifically photography, in the case of my project—act as language, as the ethical and infinite Saying/Seeing, rather than the totalizing forms of the ontological Said/Seen? The argument my own project takes is the consideration that, in crucial postmodern American phototexts, what is often experienced as a combative binary of the Saying ‘versus’ the Said is actually more of an inseparably paradoxical intertwining: these texts exist as both a Saying *and* a Said. Just as the absolute ethical endeavor seeks to both respect difference and find proximity, the texts of this present study embody both ‘forms’ of inquiry, thus deepening their ‘postmodernist,’ or in this case, seemingly contradictory nature. The act of Saying leaves its Derridean *trace* (or “residue” per Levinas qua Heidegger) in the Said; the two are interwoven in that the Said is composed of past Sayings.

In her book *The Signifying Body: Toward an Ethics of Sexual and Racial Difference*, Penelope Ingram aligns this distinction of the Saying and the Said to language of the signifying and the representational types, respectively:

In the being of language, in the corporeal significations, in the ungrounded Sayings, each body comes face-to-face with the Other and through him or her the language of Being. And in our reading encounter we experience the possibility of 'authentic Being ethically.' (112)

Ingram's book examines the signifying, authentic, and ethical languages in selected postcolonial texts, as well as certain films, in order to illuminate the ethical path towards racial and sexual difference. But what of the "reading encounter" with still photography, what of the signification in the processes of creating a humanistic photographic portraiture? How does photography achieve both the signification of the performative Saying as well as the representation of the figural Said when dispatched across a literary milieu? Again, I argue that the two are symbiotically intertwined in that the temporal building-blocks of the past Sayings inform the constative Saids, but does the inauthenticity of the Said preserve its same 'ethical inferiority' amongst the discourse(s) on the 'language of vision?' Or, does the 'vision of language' transform the Saying and the Said into something more comparable to the phrasings of the Seeing and the Seen? And how are these metaphysical sets united underneath a temporally irreducible banner?

Well, in the case of Levinas, Adriaan Peperzak asserts that there is a "unity" to be found between the Saying and the Said, despite "the temporal distance and the 'diachrony' between an author and his text" for, after all, "saying is a sort of foreword or 'preface' to the message that follows. Saying and said do not coincide perfectly; they are not completely simultaneous: the said comes from a saying" (60). Acknowledging this supposed imbalance is fundamental, especially in light of 'applying' it to the phototextual work. In the process of capturing the Other's portrait, authentically, there is an open communication happening (the Seeing): a verbal discussion as well as a manipulation of

photographic apparatuses to continually participate in optimal and unencumbered language. And then once the image is taken (even if in multiplicitous fashion per the traditional 'photoshoot'), it is finalized, immortalized: it becomes the Seen. These two moments occur in differential temporalities, and, per Barthes, we can even add in a third, futural moment if we consider the *viewing* of this image by a third party, later on down the line of history. Yet, these two (or three) temporalities temporalize themselves only if we experience them concurrently, it is "the noncontradictory incommensurability of the saying and the said [that] makes their combination, unity, and simultaneity possible, in spite of the 'diachronic' primacy of the saying" (Peperzak 65). While perhaps not on equivalent metaphysical footing (as Levinas and Irigaray will affirm), the various temporal modes of the language of vision exist inseparably, and this inability for detachment fosters an equiprimordial, ethical sincerity.

In an attempt to make something which can feel very abstract appear more concretely, I think some thoughts from Richard Powers's first novel *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*, a work vital to Chapter Two of this dissertation, may prove illustrative with its potential in continually explicating this impression of the borderless temporality in the Saying/Said matrix as manifesting as, or transgressing towards, the Seeing/Seen. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator of one of the threads (this is the first-person thread and the narrator of this semi-fictional thread, we learn, is named Mr. P) concludes in an expository chapter entitled, the "Face of Our Time," a chapter name that is shared with title of the photographer August Sander's portrait portfolio of which the Powers' book title photograph is derived: "[Sander] inadvertently helped uncover the principle truth of this century: viewer and viewed are fused into an indivisible whole. To see an object from a distance is already to act on it, to change it, to be changed" (45-46). The biographical, near-reportage of these 'Mr. P chapters' grow as the book progresses,



propagate in the sense that the narrator's thoughts on and about portrait photography broaden, expand, and mature in both their pragmatic and reflective ability. So, who are *the viewer* and *the viewed* in this early context? Sander and his subjects? Mr. P gazing at the Sander print on the wall in the Detroit Institute of Art? Readers looking at the material Powers text itself? Anca Cristofovici affirms Powers's notions that such indivisible structures act equiprimordially to truth: Powers's narrative threads "are connected by a logic that places meaning at the intersection between (potentially infinite) 'variations on an irretrievable original'" (47). In other words, the question of viewer and viewed is essentially irrelevant; or more appropriately, the question of the liminal space between such positions is extraneous—it is with similar parallelism Barthes co-existing elements *studium* and *punctum* will reign (these various simultaneities align not only in their paradoxical fastenings but also in what their fastenings say, or better yet, *show*). But this study's Chapter Six will conclude with the work of Ariella Azoulay and her theory on the "civil contract of photography," which argues for the *three* spaces: the photographer/operator, the photographed/subject, and the spectator/viewer of the image; I will argue that this is a more appropriate photo-ethical scaffold for the twenty-first century, something that the two Powers's novels used in my project astoundingly anticipate. And as I also hope to show in Chapters Two and Three, and more generally beyond that, how Powers initially deepens the ethical proximity via a narrative complexity that prioritizes self-referential (postmodernist) textual play: his phototextual tactics that engage with temporality, memory, and imagery on both the level of the fiction and the manner of the fiction's presentation, thus placing readers into an ethical binary moving through then perhaps beyond a Levinasian Saying and Said, into the unifying facility of both the Seeing and the Seen.

From a critical perspective, it is Irigaray who eventually moves beyond Levinas as well, developing her own ideas of a Seeing and a Seen in *The Way of Love*. As mentioned, Irigaray's 2002 work grows outward from Heidegger's later works on language, greatly expanding on her own earlier positions regarding the significance of the caress, the physical interactions that stimulate and further promulgate the (visual) ethical encounter. What I find rather useful in Irigaray is her assertion that vision is *different*, neither inferior nor superior to language, *and therefore a perfectly suitable framework for comprehending and ethically building from difference*. Furthermore, I will continue to argue that authentic photographic *speaking* is language, *is* ethics. Worthy of excerpting at length for the content, naturally, but also even just because of her enduring lyrical eloquence, Irigaray's exemplary thoughts here on perception interlock into the larger discourse of understanding and appreciating ethical difference:

The recognition of the other as different means that approaching involves an irreducible distancing. This distancing lies, insurmountable, in the drawing near to one another, like an elusive mystery that we transgress ceaselessly in an anticipation of desire, but of which the preservation is necessary in order that desire unfold toward a blossoming which does not happen without withdrawal. Nor without accepting that, in the present, an invisible intervenes at the level of representation--of things, objects, concepts. In order to welcome the other, it is rather to perception that it is important to return seeing, on the condition however that seeing not claim that all become visible and that it not conceal this lack of visibility through representation. (133-134)

Certainly, for Irigaray, Seeing is how to welcome the Other and Seeing is defined as such because it remains adverse to that which is totalizing in its vision, nor concealing through the potentialities of representation, that is, the Seen. Relatedly, in *Camera Lucida*, Barthes speaks often of "the mask" and that it is with such concealment that meaning manufactures itself through the portrait, for if something is maskless, it says too much, too quickly and too brusquely: "Photography cannot signify (aim at a generality) except by assuming a mask" (34). Does Irigaray's Seeing, albeit stated with its cautious, though

necessary, caveats, juxtapose too sharply with Barthes concept of the mask, of finding 'meaning' through the undisclosed? I don't think so, for Barthes's mask, despite its penchant for layering, *is* genuine in its dissemination of the discourse of difference. If everything was indeed bare, instead of existing as a grouping of unspoiled multiplicities, that is as "a pure mask" (34), then there would be no need for ethical conversation (and this harkens to Levinas's points on memory—if we remembered everything, the ethical would fail to thrive). But moreover, this is why photography exists as a pristine postmodernist tool: such apparent paradoxes demonstrate the union of a Seeing and a Seen.

This seems to reach a sort of apex with the concept of 'visual touching' as proclaimed by Irigaray, of course, but also by Derrida later in *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, a book in conversation with the ethical phenomenology of, clearly, Jean-Luc Nancy. First, growing out of her concept of "the caress," Irigaray produced an important reading of Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* in her *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1984): her famous essay "The Fecundity of the Caress" (of which this study's title pays homage) questions the structures of Levinas's sensual prioritizations: "before orality comes to be, touch is already in existence" (187). This succinct yet commanding quote from Irigaray is representative of how her work from that essay could be quite useful, and there are several instances in my literary and visual textual examples throughout this study's five body chapters where I will make this tangible. I will use Irigaray's work to make the important and necessary connection between the visual imagery and ethics. Here is a brief, yet very palpable, example: Laura Wilson, in her book about Richard Avedon's famous *In The American West* portrait series, recalls how the photographer would often mirror the person's posture when talking with them and arrange their clothes, tuck in their shirt for them, adjust a jacket; "it was one of his ways of connecting...it was his way of

encouraging the subject without giving specific directions that might make the person self-conscious" (21-22), Wilson writes. Avedon, who photographed both genders extensively over the six years of this project, reiterates the significance of the touch as a *priori* and necessary to ushering connections via the face. Therefore, I use important biographical texts like Wilson's, alongside the photographic portraiture work of Avedon, August Sander (in relation to the Ricahrd Powers's novel *Three Farmers on Their Way to Dance*), and Richard Rinaldi to fortify my own contribution regarding the critical position asserting that these photographers consciously engaged with identical ethical methods for producing their respective images. To put it differently, I resolve to explain how these photographers work ethically via Irigaray's notion of "fecundity of the caress" to envelope their subjects (meta)physically.

Additionally, in terms of Irigaray's other meaningful contributions, her essay "What Other Are We Talking About?" from a *Yale French Studies* issue devoted entirely to Levinas, builds off work from her books *Speculum of the Other Woman* (and the essay therein, "On the Other as Woman," 1985) and *The Way of Love* (2002), but also seems much more explicit in its assertions. In "What Other Are We Talking About?" Irigaray says that:

There can in fact be no real recognition of the other as other unless the feminine subject is recognized as radically other with respect to the masculine subject...such a conception of the other subsists in Levinas's work. (68)

Therefore, in not considering how each belong to a different world nor how the alterity of the masculine *is* the feminine, Levinas's "way of defining it bears witness to the masculine egocentrism of the culture in which such a statement is expressed" (71).

While I am not fully persuaded that Levinas was *deliberately* excluding women, Irigaray's ideas are significant in talking about Other-connections across gendered or racial divides. Penelope Ingram speaks to this point in *The Signifying Body*: certainly, "Irigaray's goal in

arguing for a recognition of sexual difference is to bring the feminine into culture" (xxviii). But, like Ingram, I think that this ethical model may prove futurably unsustainable if only posited as such an insurmountable binary pair, for it "limits the possibility for achieving difference beyond the two" (xxviii). With that said, Irigaray's thought *does* offer the opportunity to exist on the path to the illuminated clearing of disclosure, for after all as she claims in *The Way of Love*, "from the outside, man and woman cannot be approached. But the existence of mediations proper to each favors a coexistence in difference where drawing near to one another in preservation of distance becomes possible" (134). As an example of how I plan to further invest in the writings of Irigaray, it might prove valuable to return to the same scene in Don DeLillo's *Mao II*, when Brita begins her first photographic portrait session with the writer Bill, "she felt a force in the uneasy force...the force of a body in the room" (35); while not physically touching him (at least in that moment), she can still *feel* him prior to any other engagement. As the session continues, DeLillo writes: "space was closing in the way it did when a session went well. Time and light were narrowed to automatic choices" (38). Brita then moves in and "touched a hand to his face, tilting it slightly left..." "Touching Bill Gray"..." "And when did women start photographing men in the first place?" (43). The scene is flurried, yet not rushed, and readers are convinced of what is happening between the two, despite differences in age, in gender. This, to me, is just a singular example of Irigaray and Ingram's theorizing in tangible, textual action, and I plan to apply such an ethics of difference in this dissertation; Irigaray speaks of sexual mediation and it is such mediations that will inform my analysis. Finally, Irigaray's concept of the caress gives rise to this notion of 'visual touching,' as an optical element in direct correspondence to the physical, and even linguistic ingredients. In the final chapter to *The Way of Love*, a chapter entitled "Rebuilding the World," Irigaray writes that: "too entrusted to a certain

look or a certain listening-to in the service of representation, the relation with the other has forgotten what it owes to touching—among others visual and acoustic touching” (150). Such a concept of touch from her *The Way of Love and Sharing the World* comprise the critical and philosophical backbone of Chapter Five. So, in order to rebuild, and ultimately share our world(s), we must always already remember what it means to engage with-in such visual touching.

This dissertation intends to demonstrate, through certain American postmodern phototexts, that models of such visual touching already exist, out there, to be studied, emulated, respected. The early Richard Powers example demonstrates this, as does the Don DeLillo excerpts that I have already cited. This project will evaluate more relentlessly those aforementioned texts, as well as additional examples that existed throughout both the pre and post-9/11 postmodern American literary epoch, by writers such as Mark Z. Danielewski in Chapter Four and Jonathan Safran Foer in Chapter Five, in addition to the work of photographic portraitists Richard Avedon, August Sander, and Richard Rinaldi in the respectively corresponding chapters. Then, if 9/11 exists as the chasm<sup>4</sup> or maybe instead as the “chiasmatic,” that is the divider and unifier simultaneously as per Levinas, what does this field of pluralistic ethics look like in the “future,” in the *post-9/11* phototextual world? Mustn’t a comparison to latter eras be drawn in order to justify or validate the actions of the former? Chapter Six will approach more closely the critical work Ariella Azoulay and Judith Butler, alongside Slavoj Žižek, who all recognize the political implications of this ethical shift and explore the impression

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<sup>4</sup> In the final pages of *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Slavoj Žižek’s book written in the immediate wake of 9/11, he concludes by posing the following question: “do we, in the West, have any right to condemn the excluded when they use any means, inclusive of terror, to fight their exclusion? This, then, is the test of how seriously we take the Derridean-Levinasian topic of hospitality and openness towards the Other” (150). For Žižek, and others as we shall see, 9/11 exists perhaps as some sort of metaphysical dividing line in the sand. *But is it such a demarcating boundary?*

if it is even possible to ever return to the ethics of a pre-9/11 fictive world. Or, conversely, if such a return is even warranted if nothing has 'changed' after all? Chapter Five closes with a discussion of Richard Rinaldi's *Touching Strangers* portraiture project alongside the post-9/11 phototextual novel, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005). That novel directly address 9/11 and implements strong photographic elements in its narrative course, and alongside Rinaldi's portraiture, I will end with questions asking if we've recovered the ethical stances before the Event (or if we even want to), and if the current ethical dilemma is just another characteristic of the continued fragmentation, or if it's something else entirely.

#### An 'Ethical Delerium?'

As I have inevitably demonstrated already, this study seeks to interrogate many questions and perhaps answer very few. Some of the largest ones openly ask: is it not inherently ethical to immerse oneself in a polyvocal and pluralistically fragmentary ethics, of an ethical framework comprised of differentiated ethical theories? Does even engaging in the play of such seemingly deconstructive queries imply a return to a 'fashionable,' meta-discursive critical circularity, and is this even such a bad thing?

And in speaking of matters of a critical circularity, perhaps ending with Badiou, a sort of forebear to this present introductory chapter, is a telling interlocutor to conclude with. While I will revisit Badiou again in Chapter Four, I will say now how his contributions to ethics could indeed be seen as representing an apogee on the twentieth-century ethical trajectory, not only because of its simple sequential appearance but also, more grandly, in its outlyingly fresh ethical perspective, as I fleetingly discussed here at the onset. But as for Badiou himself, his work *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* exists at an important place on the axis of twentieth-century ethical thought for, while

the original essay was published in 1993, the English translation came out in late 2000/early 2001. As Peter Hallward boldly claims in the preface to the English translation of Badiou's book, Badiou's

incisive contribution to perhaps the most oversaturated field of contemporary philosophical and cultural inquiry amounts to far more than a "timely clarification of the issues" or an "invigorating reconfiguration of the problem." Badiou's book does nothing less than *evacuate* the foundation upon which every deconstructive, "multicultural," or "postcolonial" ethics is built...the whole tangled body of doctrine variously associated with the *Other*—and developed by Levinas, Derrida, Irigaray, and Spivak, among so many 'others'—is here simply swept away. (xxxv)

Badiou's book is split into five parts and the first few sections, in short, disassembles the "prevailing views" of ethics by those thinkers mentioned above. The latter part works to "sketch the reconstruction of an acceptable concept of ethics, whose maxim is subordinate to the development of truths" (Badiou 90). For Badiou, other contemporary discussions of ethics have avoided the importance of the *event*, or as Critchley has termed it "concrete *situations*" (42, italics in original). For Badiou, the subject acts and behaves ethically from a demand received from the event, the situation—Critchley dubs this a "situated universality" (42). And in this process of acting ethically in light of a situation or event, the subject falls into, over a period of time, a process of *truth*, or as Badiou defines it "the real process of fidelity to an event" (Badiou 42). Likewise, it is via this truth-seeking process amidst a situational existence, that subjects are able to differentiate between good and evil, a key gateway to authentic existence in these times. For Badiou, it is a commitment and responsibility (to use Levinas et al.'s terminology) to the evental situation and its perceptible participants, rather than to some abstract Other, that "motivates ethical action whose justification exceeds that situation and works to bring about its transformation and amelioration" (Critchley 49).



While my own project does not start and stop with Badiou, it is his ethical clarifications that appear contemporaneously to the settings seen in some of the literary fiction my dissertation seeks to investigate. Though aside from displaying a superficial chronological similarity, Badiou's radically ethical thought is important for my project because it anticipates the twenty-first century's adulation of The Event, thoughts that echo in *all* of the literature of my current project. Badiou's ideas stating that entities engage in ethical encounters based on groundbreaking situations correspond well to the fragmentary nature of other postmodern thought (if we view this fragmentation as oppositional to the cohesiveness of earlier ethical theorizing, albeit lofty and conceptual)—this is not to speak disparagingly of such thought, just that the turning over of the twentieth-century via 9/11 seems to align with the concretism of Badiou's philosophy.

This concluding, selective commentary on Badiou, as well as the others in this present chapter, are intended foremost to illustrate a prevalent, and perhaps problematic, *topos* in the last few decades of discourse on ethics: the valid possibility that ethics—to some, the first philosophy—appears engaged in various modes of alteration and/or unrest, and that there may be uncertainty in both classification and practice of the modern ethical encounter, and that we may finally be immersed in what Badiou has dubbed, “the ethical delirium” (liii); hence why I also feel that it may be necessary to conclude this opening chapter with his thought. Besides, while still appreciating the highly “positive effects” (90) of ethical relationships, Critchley's understanding of the tributary course ethics has taken astutely reflects the new importance of the *event* borne forth and substantiated through 9/11, as well as by means of the political foci occurring at all turns. In short, the meaning of ethics since Levinas has transformed alongside

concurrent political and philosophical discourse—and this transformation is, of course, neither “good” nor “bad.” It just *is*.

Finally, if we go back to my initial evocation of Badiou via Dews, my ideas of tracking a kind of recent ethical lineage might place me into Peter Dews’s camp of those aligned to expressing the “exuberant assertion of pluralistic fragmentation.” I think this entirely positive methodology is paramount for demonstrating and demarcating the relationship of ethics to photography, especially in the American postmodern period of which I’m concerned. This is all about an inclusivity: I would be the first to wholeheartedly admit that I am aligned to the ‘group’ of these so-called ‘Pluralistic Fragmentists’ and that this present study will do work ethically to practice ethics, bringing together metaphysics, ontology, literature, and photography, thus offering an avenue for (dis)closure in our current, and so often troubling, times captured best with-in the matrix of the phototextual.

## Chapter 2

### Temporality and a (Un)masked Facingness

“The man obsessed with the involutions of particular faces sought in them the type of our Face-in-General. Sander unmasks the individual only to restore to the denuded figure the mask of the clan. The images in *Face of Our Time* attempt to remove the obtrusive presence of the photographer in order to call full attention to the photographic object, the face of our time.”

-Richard Powers, *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*

“But it is life that is still not arrested in the absolute immobility of a death mask.”

-Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*

“The most profound intimacy becomes a protective veil. Turns itself into an aura that preserves the nocturnal quality of the encounter, without masks.”

-Luce Irigaray, “The Fecundity of the Caress”

### An Inquest Through Barthes

In regards to published writings on photography, to say that the work of Roland Barthes is referenced frequently would be a vast understatement, especially his pinnacle treatise on the medium, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Yet, I hope to implement his groundbreaking thought and engage with it in a fresh light in order to extend the conversation, even if just slightly. Thus, in this chapter I will ask some crucial questions that link Barthes to the ethical metaphysics of Levinas, as well as their respective secondary critics. Do Barthes’s theories on photography lead to an understanding that the discourses of art, and especially portrait photography, may exist as both the Saying/Seeing *and* the Said/Seen, as both totalizing *and* infinite, and if so, what are the ethical repercussions herein? Additionally, do Barthes’s engagements with

the multi-temporal, and therefore seemingly paradoxical, recognitions regarding memory and time help reinforce and expand a deconstructive, Levinasian ethical paradigm, especially since, as Annabel Herzog reminds us that, “Levinas equates memory with consciousness or ‘the essence of interiority,’ thus denying it a place in the realm of ethics, which concerns relationships that transcend being” (333)? Furthermore, how can I more deeply ‘promote’ Levinas’s own discursive queries regarding the face, as complexly probed across many of his works, but especially in *Totality and Infinity*, when he asks: “is not the face given to vision? How does the epiphany as a face determine a relationship different from that which characterizes all our sensible experience” (187)? In her chapter “Torture and the Ethics of Photography” from the book *Frames of War*, Judith Butler posits that:

If, as the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas claims, it is the face of the other that demands from us an ethical response, then it would seem that the norms that would allocate who is and who is not human arrive in visual form. These norms work to *give face* and to *efface*. Accordingly, our capacity to respond with outrage, opposition, and critique will depend in part on how the differential norm of the human is communicated through visual and discursive frames. (77)

Not only, then, is ‘ethics an optics,’ but also that the encounter with the face results from a deconstructive, differing relationship which indeed critiques *and* learns via a language of *seeing*. Simon Critchley picks up on a related development as well, reminding us that for Levinas, “ethical discourse is not restricted to verbal acts” and that as the base for authentic dialogue, the face roots itself the “primordial Saying, or ‘original language,’” which is always-already a non-verbal utterance, thereby aligning to Levinas’s own notations of this “language of the eyes” (178-179). So, how can we ‘say’ (or ‘see’) the idea that portraiture’s trace grants us that this vision *is* authentic, but only if it transcends sensory experience to access the sites of open being, via the face-to-face relations with the Other? And finally, how do selected works of postmodern American literature and

portraiture align with such categorizations and carve out intersections and indices where ethics, photography, and literature correspondingly flourish?

Barthes's *Camera Lucida* has long been considered one of the so-called 'big three' in works of photographic theory, sitting alongside Sontag's *On Photography* and Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."<sup>5</sup> And many book-length studies and essay collections have been devoted to its explication and understanding, most notably the fairly recent: *Photography Degree Zero* (2009), a collection of essays edited by Geoffrey Batchen, and James Elkins's *What Photography Is* (2011), a book that proposes "to write against" *Camera Lucida*, which according to Elkins is a book that is "both a scapegoat and touchstone, marginal and model. It is cited in passing, trivially; but it's also pondered at length" (ix).<sup>6</sup> Elkins, and others, are right to assert its overuse, but the portions I primarily find useful for my own project, as I've stated, relate to Barthes's ideas recounting the multiple, outwardly contradictory temporalities existent in photography and how these temporalities coincide with ontological, and what I'll contend, ethical concerns.

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<sup>5</sup> Geoff Dyer, in an introduction to a collection of John Berger's writings on photography, entitled *Understanding a Photograph*, asserts that for all three of these writers, Barthes, Sontag, and Benjamin—well, four, for he includes Berger in this list—that photography "was an area of special interest, but not a specialism. They approached photography not with the authority of curators or historians of the medium but as essayists, writers" (9); yet, Dyer ends his introduction with a reference to a quite appropriately named work by Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*: "the traffic between storytelling and metaphysics is continuous" (Berger qtd. Dyer 12). I find this quoted recognition to the infinitude in active metaphysical *and* physical dialogues wholly relevant to my current chapter.

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, even the formatting and textual appearances of Elkin's book purposely match those of Barthes's, a curious detail aside from large portions that echo Barthes's actual language itself, sometimes even verbatim. However, I tend to agree with Malcolm Barnard's generally critical response to Elkins's book from a 2011 volume of *Photography & Culture*; where most notably of Elkins's shortcomings, says Barnard, are his anti-humanist stances, which thus cause Elkins to fail to move both *through* and *beyond* Barthes's book, which is a work that is very steeped in the phenomenological elements of representation specific to "the human element" (Barnard 250).

Yet for the sake of contextual brevity in this introductory section, some preliminary items to review: Barthes claims that when we look at photographs, we experience a sense of simultaneous and multiple temporal moments that relate to death, ultimately; to, on one hand, a “future death...an anterior future of which death is at the stake” (96). As a legitimately substantial example of this, Barthes gazes at a photograph of Lewis Payne, a Lincoln assassination conspirator, handcuffed on the eve before his execution: the subject was alive at the time the photograph was taken, but the image also marks the inevitable death of the subject, for his execution is in the morning. In a way, the ‘purpose’ of the portrait is to immortalize Payne as a criminal and murderer in order to remind future viewers that his close death relates to those facts. This all makes up pieces of the profound *punctum* of the photograph for Barthes, the puncturing and piercing quality, the thing that ‘pricks’ us, that denotes both the “*this will be* and *this has been*” (96, emphasis in original). Pricks us but cannot always be fully articulated. So, fasten this with any ‘present’ viewing of the photograph and all temporal grounding is swept from beneath us; thus, the *punctum* in this portrait then is really Time itself, Barthes famously claims.

Alongside the *punctum*, Barthes also speaks memorably of the *studium*, the other half of this “co-presence of two elements” (22); at the risk of oversimplifying here, the *studium* could be understood as the background and compositional elements of a photograph, the formal ‘pieces’ that must certainly be present, but do not engender the same significance as the *punctum*—of course, one person’s *punctum* could be another’s mere *studium*, and vice versa. In fact, the ethical implications of this very reciprocal comprehension will be a chief point in need of rigorous unpacking soon. But, as Elkins posits in another work, the essay “What Do We Want Photography To Be?,” viewers may find that in the *punctum*’s unpredictability and essential incommunicability, that “in effect

the *punctum* becomes an unusual example of the *studium*...which is, I take it, the exact opposite of what Barthes intended” (171). In other words, the unspoken and inarticulateable elements that should prick some, become background pieces with their inabilities to escape the touch of their said, their seen for others. I would argue then, that it seems what Barthes (and by proxy, Elkins) is wrestling with here relates directly to my understanding on the Saying and the Said: metaphysical discourse strives for transcendent methodology, yet such discourse must find representational language to generate it in the first place. And this leads us to yet an additional question I’ll explore: how do we engage ethically with our interpretation of the *punctum* and the *studium*, which fasten, respectively, to the saying and the said, the seeing and the seen; do the traces of the *studium* leave their residue on/in the *punctum* and allow us to approach something resembling (dis)closure?

The *punctum* and *studium* are so often explored and Geoffrey Batchen is accurate when stating how not only the larger book *Camera Lucida* is “surely the most quoted book in the photographic canon” and that those two terms “have become part of the standard lexicon of photographic debate, along with a particular understanding of photographic time and of photography’s relationship to death and a certain narcissistic way of thinking” (3). However, these terms, and their subsequent temporal ramifications, will prove useful for my own project in that they link to Levinas’s consideration of the temporal ‘unfolding’ that occurs in authentic relationships and responsibilities with the Other. Take for example, in *Totality and Infinity*, where Levinas concludes that:

the future does not come to me from a swarming of indistinguishable possibles which would flow toward my present and which I would grasp; it comes to me across an absolute interval whose other shore the Other absolutely other...is alone capable of marking, and of connecting with the past. (283)

Consequently, these are only the partial matters that I am concerned with: the future as existing in tandem with a past, united by a present; and also how does creating a photograph of someone, a portrait of the Other, reconcile these temporal 'abnormalities?' The vision of the Other, responsible and respectful, comes anteriorly from the future into what Levinas calls "the instant," which according to Eric Severson, forms the center of Levinas's early philosophy of time (49), and therefore, I would also argue, the backbone of his conception of ethics, for if we recall from the early work, *Time and the Other*:

the relationship with the future, the presence of the future in the present, seems all accomplished in the face-to-face with the Other. The situation of the face-to-face would be the very accomplishment of time; the encroachment of the present on the future is not the feat of the subject alone, but the intersubjective relationship. (79)

Time is thusly *the* non-in-difference with the Other. This true time, or "the veritable time" (12) as Richard Cohen calls it, comes with the ethical rupture of the Other's time with that of my own, in the true proximity, in the infinite distance without distance, or as Derrida qua Nancy referred to it as: the being-together yet separate. This true time *is* the instant, it *is* the timeless present, without any motion and without anxiety for the future, and therefore time is cast as a genuine "gift from the other" (Severson 63). This *active* act of photographic portraiture, this face-to-face method of *Saying*, which then gives way to transference into an instant *Seeing*, in context of the phototextual encounter, accomplishes this very time-based intersubjective exchange.

Relatedly, in a discussion about Barthes in *The Emancipated Spectator*, Jacques Ranciere speaks about "the pensive image" in which the pensiveness of an image is that which

refers to a condition that is indeterminately between the active and the passive. This indeterminacy problematizes the gap...between two ideas of the image: the common notion of the image as duplicate of a thing and the image conceived as artistic operation. (107)



Ranciere asserts that photography, at its best, exists between art and non-art, as well as between “the intentional and the unintentional, the known and the unknown, the expressed and unexpressed, the present and the past” (115) and, most importantly I argue, with this referred space between activity and passivity, or the notion of representation versus material production. In other words, Ranciere’s categorical divisions for the active and the passive here might as well stand in for the Saying and the Said, the Seeing and the Seen, respectively. But Ranciere uses these binary divisions to not only show the complex positioning of the photographic image (and *how* it’s created), but also a lead-in to his response and extension of Barthes’s own pairing of the *studium* and *punctum*. Ranciere, too, talks about Barthes’s understanding of the Payne portrait to discuss what he, Ranciere, points to “the ethical regime of images,” or the way that pictures “derive their legitimacy” (113) from their representation as *someone* rather than as a mere artistic edifice. Ranciere calls Barthes’s ‘use’ of photography as a “transport” (110), that is, its ability to transmit specific *sensibilities* to the viewer; Barthes’s *punctum* for Ranciere is the notion that in portrait photography, the “affect produced directly on us by the body of the one who faced the lens, who is no longer there” (113), while *speaking* of death’s ability to transport, also speaks, I would maintain, of the radically ethical.

For while I do think Ranciere makes some strong and significant points regarding Barthes’s readings, as well as some more across-the-board aesthetic implications for photography overall, it feels like there is still an open niche here for a final ethical ‘push’ to be had: his numerous aforementioned sets of questioned (or: questionable?) binaried oppositions are quite telling in that it seems *only* photography can deconstruct ethically, *and/or* ethically deconstruct, these “tensions between several modes of representation” (115). However, what Ranciere deems “transport,” I would dub “transcendent;” for the

performative Saying in the photoethical phototext, the type of texts this study allies itself with, make that closing metaphysical leap.

So, in returning Barthes's reading of the famous photographic portrait of Lewis Payne, Michael Sacasas asserts that the Payne's portrait displays how "he was a pioneer of subjectivity [because in front of] the camera, many of his contemporaries either stared blankly...or else they played a role" ("Dead and Going to Die"). Sacasas continues, claiming that photographer Gardner's immediate copyrighting of the image (he did not file for such a status with the other images of the other conspirators, it appears), as well as additional biographical details of the photo shoot accounting Payne's acquiescence, all demonstrate how *something* special happened during the portrait-making: Payne "played himself...the camera is now irrelevant" ("Dead and Going to Die"). The point is this: the dynamic process and *exchange* of photographic Seeing between Payne and Gardner certainly left the residue of an oft-discussed Seen, but in the final portraits, we still see this very residue, this trace left by the Seeing. As Sacasas alludes to here, Payne's gaze does everything but deny that principled encounter.

In linking Barthes to Levinas, *through* conversations with specific postmodern American phototexts, my project will demonstrate how the *punctum* and the *studium*, operating together simultaneously, represent some theoretical underpinnings that in turn help to concretize the way photography engenders truthful, authentic, and ethical relationships to the Other. Moreover, Barthes's notions of the temporal-spanning simultaneity of photography fasten rather naturally with Levinas's ideas that genuine Other-interactions spawn a similar temporal-spanning simultaneity that becomes apparent through the face, the responsible face-to-face encounter. My expectation is that the applicableness of these parallels will draw themselves out in the fiction and portraiture projects I will examine below and throughout this project, phototextual works

that, I argue, demonstrate a viable, recoverable, and replicable archetype for an active ethical touching.

#### On Barthes's 'Co-existive' Elements

In order to build from the first chapter and further develop my own 'brand' of pluralistic ethics here in regards to the postmodern American phototext, some additionally deeper interpretations of Barthes's most famous *punctum/studium* pairing need, first, examining, *then* expounding upon. However, long before *Camera Lucida*, which was Barthes's final work, he certainly wrote about photography on numerous other occasions and some of these earlier ruminations can be quite fruitful for the present discussion, for they deal with similarly paired notions and demonstrate the genesis and successive progress of Barthes's thought. So, are the opening ideas here on the *studium* and the *punctum* growing *outward* from the idea that Barthes-as-semiologist struggled with photography's paradoxical coding systems, as first seen in his essay "The Photographic Message" (and developed later with "Rhetoric of the Image")? How did this early thought engender what some argue as his later self-doubt on the theories of structuralism? After all, it is with "The Photographic Message" where Barthes first asserts that:

the photographic paradox can then be seen as the co-existence of two messages, the one without a code (the photographic analogue), the other with a code (the 'art,' or the treatment, of the 'writing,' or the rhetoric, of the photograph)...this structural paradox coincides with an ethical paradox: when one wants to be 'neutral,' 'objective,' one strives to copy reality meticulously, as though the analogical were a factor of resistance against the investment of values...how then can the photograph be at once 'objective' and 'invested,' natural and cultural?  
(19-20)

Certainly the "ethical paradox" Barthes refers to (meta-constructed as a binary to the "structural paradox," no less?) strives to reconcile the difference and close the gap between objective and subjective experience; but, conferring to Kathrin Yacavone,

photography for Barthes also helped him to “overcome the egotism of his earlier writings...introducing an emotion-based subject defined in relation to the Other” (272).

The recognition of this paradox, intertwined as it is between co-elements, not only reinforces the complexities inherent in the medium, but also the meta-difficulties in attempting to write about it. According to Victor Burgin, even though Barthes, in his terminological tendencies,

introduces linguistic concepts to refine the distinction and give it the status of general law...we should remember that there is no paradox in the real, only in the way the real is *described*; the paradox is a purely linguistic (more specifically *logical*) entity. (34-35)

What is happening here, and as Burgin markedly implies, is the evident paradox in Barthes’s own struggling with one of the most eminent metaphysical questions regarding a correspondence between/of the representational and the *authentic* (or, for Burgin and Barthes, the “pure”) and the manners of proliferating these depictions, whether linguistic or imagistic.

But what else of this “co-existence”—is that word itself not the *quintessence* of the ethical experience as *representative* of the reflective vision for the difference/proximity binary? After all, Barthes says that “the photographic message is the continuous message” (17) and that in its ‘codelessness,’ this means that photography, in all its forms, appears to consist of that which cannot be articulated except by an infinite and active discourse of *seeing*. Of course, Barthes goes on in regards to this idea of the co-existence of elements in the photographic message, providing nomenclatural identifications for these ostensibly contradictory phrasings: he calls the two pieces the *denoted* and *connoted* messages. What are these, what do they mean and how do they function? Basically, as Barthes himself designates, the denoted message refers to “the analogical content itself (scene, object, landscape)...what is commonly called the *style* of the reproduction” (17); that is, the formal ‘thing’ represented therein, in short. The

connoted message indicates more towards a contextual response, “whose signified, whether aesthetic or ideological, refers to a certain ‘culture’ of the society receiving the message...the manner in which the society to a certain extent communicates what it thinks of it” (17). Karen Beckman states that:

if, for Barthes, the *ethical paradox* of and challenge posed to us by photography lies in the simultaneity of denoted and connoted messages within a single image, then we cannot afford to ignore either aspect...this leaves us having to account for ‘*the photograph about which there is nothing to say.*’ (313, emphasis mine)

I would wholeheartedly contend that Barthes use of “say” here (this line comes from his discussion of the, famously non-reproduced, “Winter Garden Photograph,” a portrait of his mother, relayed in Part Two of *Camera Lucida*) is covertly, and transcendently, ethical for Barthes also comprehensively shows us, and as Beckman affirms, “that we need ethics in the first place because our love is unevenly distributed, freely given, but only to some, and for reasons that we cannot fully explain” (324). So, it’s not that the photographs are message-less, per se, but that they actually speak, continuously, in a manner that transcends language; Barthes *experiences* love, he experiences *something* (a *punctum*, to be sure), and these ‘nothing to say’s’ move diachronically across the caress of photographic discourse. Therefore, on one hand, photography transmits a bi-messaged form of the figural: a denoted—the literal— and a connoted—the coded, the symbolic—message working in together-yet-separate unity. But do not these two terms, transmitting the dualities of meaning that they do, still only operate as a tool for interpretation of the Seen—how can one engage ethically with these inherently ethical ideas for the active *Seeing* of a phototext? In a working-towards of disclosure amongst the illuminated clearing, a much deeper exploration on Barthes’s other co-existing terms, akin to that *through* Beckman above, may help lead us there.

I just conveyed some elementary ethical understandings and definitions of the term-sets *denoted* and *connoted* as well as the 'legacies,' *studium* and *punctum*; however I feel further extrapolation is necessary in order for me to demonstrate the relevance of these ideas in the metaphysical, (meta)ethical, and postmodern American textual milieus. Eduardo Cadava and Paola Cortes-Rocca, in their essay "Notes on Love and Photography,"<sup>7</sup> declare of the way that *Camera Lucida* perpetually proceeds to seek and speak "a language to commensurate with the paradoxical character of the photograph," that is, a language that "is guided and interrupted" by a desire and a mourning (113). And it is through this very

notorious distinction that Barthes makes between the photograph's *punctum* and *studium*—a distinction that, as we will see, is only the simulacrum of a distinction (even if, at the same time, these two terms always remain different from each other)—appears to be the exemplary instance of this paradoxical compromise with desire and mourning. (113)

Cadava and Cortes-Rocca rightly claim that the division between the characteristics is, of course, a non-issue because they are only ever mere terms, groupings of letters to form symbolic words to represent raw humanistic and emotive principles. This is also why the authors reiterate Barthes's book as "belonging to the experience of love" (109), a stance asserted by others such as Jane Gallop and James Elkins. Furthermore, Cadava and Cortes-Rocca redirect readers' attentions to Barthes's own moments of "photographic becoming" that he lays out in the beginning of the work: "once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of 'posing,' I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image. This transformation is an active one" (10). So, in the *active* process of making

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<sup>7</sup> Is this the appropriate place to insert, or divert, the discussion once more to Luce Irigaray's notions of love and the figural as first witnessed in Chapter One? Maybe just in passing, as Chapter Four will look more fully at the ethics of Irigaray's loving and caressing touch.

portraiture, in this instance from the 'receiving' end as a portrait sitter, Barthes feels a *duplication* of himself, a transformative and transcendent experience. Cadava and Cortes-Rocca observe that Barthes is 'becoming' a "someone who knows that what makes him what he 'is'...is the multiplicity that *inhabits* 'him' (109-110). Certainly, as a renowned scholar and writer on photography, Barthes is in a unique position here to offer his assessment on the (ethical) exchanges integral to portrait-making, here as a subject, but his points remain valid on all other levels: the metamorphic 'authority' that photographing the Other, lovingly, can render. In essence, these two critics, through Barthes, are warning against what Margaret Olin muses about in her essay, "Touching Photographs," that the "relations to people can be as one-sided as relations to photographs" (85); this is the totalizing, irresponsible, and ultimately unethical stance that portraiture should always-already work to radically negate at every turn.

In his article entitled "Barthes's *Punctum*," Michael Fried recognizes also Barthes's insistence on the multifariousness of having one's portrait taken, concentrating on yet another (and longer) related passage from *Camera Lucida*:

in front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art...I do not stop imitating myself, and because of this, each time I am (or let myself be) photographed, I invariably suffer from a *sensation of inauthenticity*. (13, emphasis mine)

Indeed, Fried is right to horn in on this 'sensation' component, drawing attention to this "sense of theatricalization" (153), for it speaks to the phenomenological thematic existent in Barthes's work: the *sense* that photography gives, or imbues, to a portrait-sitter. And, I would add, this speaks also to the multiplicitous complexities, the active Seeing, that occurs amid a session; we just saw in the above blocked quote how Barthes experienced *four* different modes of *being*. Accordingly, how do these ontological concerns come about following the primordially of the ethical ones? In a typical deconstructionist's

manner, perhaps, to look at the things that are *not* present will bring things to light that most certainly are. For example, Fried is critical of Barthes's lack of paid attention to the portrait series of those taken in the vein of Walker Evans so called 'subway portraits,' which used cameras hidden in jackets to capture a certain "quality of being" (Sontag qtd. Fried 159)<sup>8</sup>. However, what Barthes *does* praise is the work of Richard Avedon, more of which we will see in the conclusion of this present chapter. For now, though, what interests Barthes regarding Avedon's portraits is how they so often look the viewer "*straight in the eye*" (Barthes 111);<sup>9</sup> Fried himself interestingly, and I think beautifully,

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8 Sontag writes at length in *On Photography* about this series and how there is something on people's faces when they don't know they are being observed that never appears when they do...if we did not know how Walker Evans took his subway photographs...it would be obvious from the pictures themselves that the seated passengers, although photographed close and frontally, didn't know they were being photographed; their expressions are private ones, not those they would offer to the camera. (37)

The implication here is that without the element of human-to-human interaction, that the subject is 'revealing' something they would ordinarily hide in a face-to-face exchange. The metaphysical problem with this dangerous line of thinking is that if the glance and gesture towards the Other is only one-way, ergo grievously irresponsible, or even violent, then all hope for certain *co-understanding*, and therefore possible transcendence, is lost. Secondly, who is to say that just because one is not interacting with their portrait-maker that their guard is somehow down; could not the people in these photographs still be guarded, still be sealing themselves off in the everydayness of riding a crowded subway? The irony of this second matter is, of course, Evans could never really know, as he refused to interact with his subjects in any manner, it seems; he refused to engage in actively speaking, of any *intersubjective seeing*.

9 In an extremely compact (it is but a scant two pages) essay, "Photography and Electoral Appeal" from *Mythologies*, Barthes extends this same 'face-on' importance; here, speaking in terms of political candidates' advertisements: "a full-face photograph underlines the realistic outlook of the candidate...everything there expresses penetration, gravity, frankness," whilst the "three-quarter face photograph...suggests the tyranny of an ideal: the gaze is lost nobly in the future, it does not confront" (92-93). Taking the same analytical approach as in "Rhetoric of the Image," Barthes's formalistic cues lend to intriguing metaphysical repercussions, namely that authenticity *appears* in the full exposure, or experience, of the face. Certainly, the physical and metaphysical faces differ in the depth of their identifications, but Barthes language here is revealing nonetheless, I think: honesty penetrates in the face-to-face while a face partially



dubs this quality a “facingness” (155). Paul Ardenne also explores this characteristic in an introductory essay to an anthology of portrait photography entitled *Face to Face*: “never is there less question of me being myself than when I’m being portrayed. The photography gives me a face, but it also causes me to lose face” (5); Ardenne’s implication here is that portraiture involves the active exchange and engagement between subject and the photographer (sometimes violent and sometimes not, as Ardenne’s epigraph asserts at the very beginning of my project).<sup>10</sup> Later in his essay, Ardenne also briefly mentions Levinas: “he describes the face and its active ‘faciality’ as the source of our respect for others...[but] there must be something inherently disappointing about the face and the body’s appearance to make us want to pose” (9). As he later demonstrates, Ardenne does not personally feel that the face is innately flawed, but at least as I read it, he structures his dynamic essay to seemingly probe at the confrontation of such line of query face-first: is the pose a mark of inauthenticity, is it the donning of a mask?

This facingness, this face-to-face openness, this rigorous approach forward to an authentic proximity *must* entail an equiprimordial, and responsible, working-towards of an understanding alongside the Barthesian mask in order to witness how postmodern American phototexts position themselves as leading exemplars of the ethical encounter in that age, and even our own. First off, it is forthrightly erroneous to imagine the mask as existing in ‘opposition’ to the face, as opposite *to* the face. Jill Robbins, in a fine

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obscured (the more commonly used pose in the ads, he claims) renders a nothingness, coming anteriorly from the temporal ‘that-will-be.’

<sup>10</sup> Inextricably linked to this, Ardenne also thoroughly grapples with the important Levinasian trope of the hostage (this essay contains the subtitle: “Reflections on the Plight of a Hostage”), positing in the final paragraph: “are we really hostages to the Face” (34)? The following Chapter Three will rendezvous with a detailed discussion of this very related topic of the hostage.

summarization of Levinas's treatment of aesthetics, asserts that for Levinas, "to have an image of the face, to *image* a face, is to turn it into a caricature, frozen, petrified, a *mask*...in short, there is no *ethical* image of the face; there is no ethical image" (73). But, again, the totalized, rendered, plastic face of the portrait is still just the Seen, 'equivalent' to the ontologically visual Said—it is, after all, the active process of portrait-making that infuses the face with-in a respectful aura. Furthermore, the notion of the mask *does* help foster meaning, and with meaning, then something along the path towards an understanding. After all, as Barthes says:

since every photograph is contingent (and thereby outside of meaning), Photography cannot signify (aim at a generality) except by assuming a mask. It is this word which...makes a face into the product of a society and of its history...the mask is the meaning, insofar as it is absolutely pure...yet the mask is the difficult region of Photography. Society, it seems, mistrusts pure meaning: it wants meaning, but at the same time it wants this meaning to be surrounded by noise. (35-36)<sup>11</sup>

This is a spectacular claim, to be sure, and one that needs a bit of unpacking. As a semiologist, Barthes is obviously concerned with signs and their *meaning* and, as I indicated at the top of this chapter, his writing on photography brings readers into the self-reflexive fold of his attempted reconciliations, or attempted comprehensions of the 'symbolic workings' of a photographic 'language.' And this is something Barthes's entire oeuvre appears to be working towards over its entirety. In the essay from the early seventies, "Change the Object Itself" (a few years still from *Camera Lucida* but a decade

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11 I find Jean-Luc Nancy's vigorous explications regarding meaning from the very first page of *Being Singular Plural* extremely useful: "regretting the absence of meaning itself has meaning," he writes, and "it brings to light the fact that 'meaning,' used in this absolute way, has become the bared [*dénudé*] name of our being-with-one-another" (1). Through Nancy's characteristically—and powerfully self-aware—meta-commentating, meaning co-exists with the singularized co-existing *faced* by beings. Thus, Barthes's notion of the mask and masking adheres to a similar paradox: "society," as perhaps *the* tangible quintessence of co-existing entities, wants and does not want (the existence of) meaning, hence the astute metaphor of the mask.

following the early photographic essays), the sense is clear that Barthes wants to move beyond *Mythologies*:

It is no longer myths which need to be unmasked...it is the sign itself which must be shaken; the problem is not to reveal the (latent) meaning of an utterance, of a trait, of a narrative, but to fissure the very representation of meaning. (167)

There is 'some-thing' out there that deals in masking and unmasking, an oscillating disclosure, and how these subsequent meanings are represented—or *re-presented*—especially with things that *appear* to defy the doxa of the sign's vast empire. Of course, for Barthes, the punch line here will be photography; it will be photography where he can work towards an articulation of these contradictory, sign-resisting matters.

So it will be the Barthes from *Camera Lucida* who is saying that it is photographs that can only obtain meaning when they wear a mask, for the mask implies layers of meaning and density and meticulous complexity: they make us think—this is the ancillary crux of the above blocked quote from pages 35-36 of *Camera Lucida*. Maskless images, on the other hand, are *too* revelatory, and while this seems like a form of illuminated disclosure, the maskless image actually lacks philosophical rigor. Barthes asserts that “the semiology of Photography is therefore limited to the admirable performances of several portraitists” (38) and he references, as his example, the anecdote of Andre Kertesz's portraits and how they were rejected by *Life Magazine* because they “spoke too much,” and therefore photography “is subversive not when it frightens, repels, or even stigmatizes, but when it is *pensive*, when it thinks” (38), thus is the same pensiveness which so caught Ranciere. I would extend this idea and argue that the mask is therefore deconstructive, and hence ethical if we are to follow Critchley's modeling mentioned in the previous chapter which stated that ethics inherently envisions an inquiry into what makes it so, comprises its ethical being. And Ardenne, again, speaks of a similar existence-through- absence: “ethics manifest themselves in the hidden recesses of

history as an absent presence; a promise, a hope, a thing ardently desired” (24). Or, to rephrase this a bit differently, the schema of the deconstructive and ethical array decrees that what is *not* present enhances that which *is* indeed quite extant, and thus Ardenne’s phrasing of “an absent presence” is quite astute in its seemingly paradoxical, though highly ethical, configuration.

And it is also within this section of *Camera Lucida* that Barthes directly refers to both Avedon and August Sander, the latter of which of whose work, specifically one image really (Figure 1), is the focal linchpin of Richard Powers’s first novel, *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* (the novel and the photograph *share* the same title). Barthes is unambiguously tying his ideas, his *meaning*, to portrait photography. I hope that by now directing the discussion towards Powers’s novel, and then Avedon’s portraits, specifically selections from his *In the American West* series, that I can demonstrate how they can teach us how to engage ethically—*through* Levinas and *through* Barthes—with the photographic Other. For initiating, meeting, and perpetuating the face-to-face exchange with this—or, *for* this—Other-entity, and the temporalized masks they wear, add mediated and meditative strata to the face, like topographic lines on a map maybe, undulating levels and layers strewn across the face, each denoting something of a greater whole.

#### Iconoclasm and the Critical Eye of Levinas

In Chapter One, I touched somewhat on Levinas’s ostensible iconoclasm and this is something further substantiated by a number of additional critics. Silvia Benso also recognizes, quite adamantly, that “Levinas’s renowned affirmation of the priority of ethics appears, if not a shock and a regression to a renewed form of idolatry, then at least an uneasy theme for many contemporary readers” (163), especially since he



Figure 1--Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance (Sander)

appeared to stand *alone* on these matters of visual aestheticism among his fellow thinkers and colleagues at the time. But throughout her comprehensive study, Benso deconstructs Levinas's harshly critical positions regarding art, concluding that, indeed

the ethical other signifies...in expression, whose primary mode is discourse, Levinas maintains; yet he also notices how the language of ethics is not the language of logic, grammar, and syntax, that is, the language of narration and prose, but the language of aporia, of paradox, of hyperbole, of a plus which says a minus, and a minus which says a plus. But is not such the language of art, which...cannot be wrapped and contained within the limits of human language and its significations (178-179)?

Benso is asserting, rightly, that the (*pre*)supposed contradictions essential to the 'semantics' of ethical thought appear best suited for material, visible art (she looks at sculpture and painting, mostly), for the transcendental language of the aesthetic, or "more properly aesth-ethic" (180)—a stellar compounded neologism that adheres beautifully to a meta-ethical position by its linguistic construction—may be the foremost channel for broadcasting tangible ethical understanding.

Others, like Gerald L. Bruns, attach Levinas's tussles with art and aesthetics to the simultaneity of the rise of modernist art, a broad movement that, too, struggled to find its place within the critical arena:

what is really at issue here is not the ontology of the modernist work but the limits of its reception within traditional aesthetics. Modern art, after all, especially the various movements of the avant-garde, is a repudiation of the museum. (219)

And, as Simon Critchley reminds us in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, with his characteristic brevity: "ethics, for Levinas, *is* critique" (15). Levinas propagates his hindrance with the sensation of the image, noting that, and as Bruns affirms:

phenomenology is mistaken, Levinas says, when it insists on the 'transparency' of images, as if images were signs or symbols, that is, logical expressions of subjectivity—products of 'imagination,' for example, supposing there to be such a thing. (215)

So, like Barthes that follows, Levinas is, in essence, at somewhat of a loss on how to reconcile with the image, for he knows it unquestionably contains formidable, if not outright stringent, potentialities in its signless (or: languageless?) signification for ethical critique. One may be reminded perchance of Levinas's preface to *Totality and Infinity*, where he speaks of a vision that can

reveal the possibility [of a] breach of totality, the possibility of a *signification without context*. The experience of morality does not proceed from this vision—it *consummates* this vision; ethics is an optics. But it is a "vision" without image. (23, emphases in original)

Or, rather than being at a loss for how to arbitrate with the image, do such enigmatic deliberations *reveal* something inherently ethical in the *language* of the image's fecundity? A vision is the seeing, an image is the seen.

Finally, Fabio Ciaramelli tracks Levinas's "certain slippage that introduces itself into the evaluation of art" from the initial "refusal of the 'bewitching rhythms of art'" witnessed in the early "Reality and Its Shadow" towards the late *Otherwise than Being*, the latter of which appears to treat art not just as appropriate for a language of aesthetic critique, as before, but now as a much larger, detailed, and active language itself; that is, a "language exposing itself to the temporality of the essence of being" (357-358). Furthermore, if I am reading him right, Ciaramelli seems to indicate that Levinas's equivocal comments on art over this span could even be conceivably a kind of meta-comment on the Saying and the Said binary, a working out of Levinas's self-irritation at something that is *calling*, ethically, for an active and responsible interpretation yet exists, seemingly, as a paradoxical arrangement of a representational, and thereby inauthentic, nexus lulling us out of an encountering with and for the Other. Arguably, are these not really strands on the same larger line of aesthetic inquiry, albeit exclusive to photography, which also truly baffled and frustrated Barthes—photographic art's inability for signification yet its multi-tiered power for still producing a perceptible, *sensible* affect?

And besides, these are questions that *still* flow beneath the surface of postmodern American art, photography indeed, but surely the novel as well, and Richard Powers's *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* acts as a consummate fulcrum amidst these very tensions of understanding amongst/between ethics and the (photographic) figural arts.

I chose to open this chapter with three epigraphs, in which the first comes from Powers's novel discussed here and the second from Levinas's final masterwork *Otherwise than Being*, also discussed here alongside its companion work, *Totality and Infinity*. But the former quote comes from one of the essayistic threads of Power's many-threaded novel, this allegedly 'non-fiction,' expository thread that runs parallel to the fiction, a thread designed, it would seem, to provide historical grounding to the other, 'invented' representations in the straight fictive. In a way, Power's novel is itself built ethically, aside from expounding on ethics and ethical concerns existent in photography, the *structure* itself adheres to offering a heterogenous approach to storytelling (this ethical-structural cognizance is something that Powers is also quite conscious of in another of his novels, *Plowing the Dark*, as I argue in the following chapter). Additionally, Anca Cristofovici notes with great perception how

dovetailed in the discourse of these three connected narratives are fiction and essay, two literary forms with two different ways of accessing knowledge. Powers draws on this combination because it echoes the very ambivalence inherent in photography...this synthesis of fiction and essay in *Three Farmers* parallels the problematic separation between what Sander called 'aesthetic and documentary truth.' (47)

Consequently, if Powers's meta-structure is designed to demonstrate the vacillations intrinsic to the medium of photography, then such construction *also* reveals an ethical self-awareness in its inclusive narrative pluralism. Therefore, I would assert that the novel is a pristine exemplar of the ethical postmodern American phototext: its ethical dialogue exists on several planes. But, to return to the epigraph: what does it *mean*,



what is it *saying* in the context of the masked and the unmasked, of temporality, and of the face? To answer the points in this line of inquiry systematically, I propose to read *through* Powers's tri-threaded novel with the assistance of Levinasian metaphysics, as well as offer some reinforcing substantiation via Avedon's portrait work, which appeared contemporaneously to Powers's phototextual presentation here.

Interestingly, Powers's novel deals so heavily with things that come in threes: three farmers with three different stories; three carefully built narratological paths; the concept of three photographic experiences (between: operator, subject(s), and viewer(s)); three temporal existences (past, present, future). Therefore, I find Levinas's idea that "*beyond being is a third person*" (356, italics in original), from the 1963 essay "The Trace of the Other," and taken up all the way through *Otherwise than Being* (as the title suggests), may serve well to initiating this discussion linking metaphysical ideals to postmodern American phototexts like Powers's. "The personal order to which a face obliges us is beyond being," Levinas writes in "The Trace of the Other" that it "is not definable by the oneself, by ipseity" (356) and this third person is, of course, not really a person but instead a metaphor for the metaphysical principle related to the transcendent epiphany of the face:

this third person who in a face has already withdrawn from every relation and every dissimulation, who has passed, this illeity, is not a 'less than being' by comparison with the world in which a face enters; it is the whole enormity, the inordinateness, the infinity of the absolutely other, which eludes treatment by ontology. (356)

But how do we *get* there? Again, a methodical approach to understanding, what I contend, are another significant trilogy of chief metaphysical 'doctrines' linking Powers's and Avedon to Levinas (through Barthes<sup>12</sup>): masks/unmasks; temporality; the face.

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12 Barthes, as well, in his essay "The Third Meaning," proposed the phrase the "obtuse meaning" which helps concretize his longing for a so called 'third language' to reconcile

These three items, all notated in the epigraph, and just as the other group of aforementioned trios before, ethically maneuver themselves impeccably in that they *all* engage in a proximal yet differing (and, *deferring*) relationship, in an intertwined yet distinct encountering. For merely organizational purposes, I will begin with the notion of the mask and of unmasking, and finish with the deeply interrelated ideas of the face and time.

Above, I stated how Barthes perceived of the mask in terms of portrait photography, how the masking of a subject also, puzzlingly, *unmasked* them: the meaning is in mask, the layers, and the subsequent thinking therein, makes the meaning<sup>13</sup>. And Levinas, in “The Trace of the Other,” perceives of the mask as together with that of the face:

A face presents itself in its nudity; it is not a form concealing, but thereby indicating, a ground, a phenomenon that hides, but thereby betrays a thing itself. Otherwise, a face would be one with a mask—but a mask presupposes a face. (355)

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with “the coercive powers of speech which force the speaker always to choose one side of the binaries that constitute him” (Krauss 188); Rosalind Krauss is also accurate in arguing, alongside others, how this third meaning, this obtuse and inarticulable meaning, presupposes the *punctum* of *Camera Lucida*. Obviously there is more than just a superficial third numeral that unites all these ideas; indeed, there are ‘things’ that transcend symbolic utterance, experiences that can *only* be experienced in the ethical—that is to say, an active saying and *seeing*—engagement with photography and photographic principles. The realm of such things rests in the being of this third spatial site.

13 This can also go “the other way,” so to speak: an *unmasking* brings further masking. Take for example, the character Bill Gray from Don DeLillo’s *Mao II* (a work thoroughly explored and given its own chapter, following this present one); one character remarks to another, as Marcy J. Dinius reminds us:

‘Bill had his picture taken not because he wanted to come out of hiding but because he wanted to hide more deeply, he wanted to revise the terms of his seclusion, he need the crisis of *exposure* to give him a powerful reason to intensify his *concealment*’ (140).

Again, we can clearly see Barthes’s mask-as-meaning concept at play here, ethically: the mask, whether it exists and/or non-exists, makes meaning, offers opportunity for encountering others. Of course, as we will see in the subsequent chapter, Bill’s desire to “hide more deeply” is troublesome, at best, and an utter failure, at worst.

A face indicates that which remains hidden, a mask. A face is not the *same* thing as a mask yet a mask must assume a face. To put it differently, a face is anything but a disguise or a suppression, yet, like Barthes, it still makes us *aware* of the experiential mask, of that which serves only to cover up and obscure: a nudity reveals but also informs a complete coverage. Thus, the masked face *is* ethical for it engages Others multi-laterally. And Powers's novel bears this out.

For example, as we saw in the epigraph quote, Powers's non-fictional thread practically reads like something out of Barthes's *Camera Lucida* (released just four years prior to Powers's novel), speaking as it does about the photographer August Sander, just as Barthes did in his brief section on the mask. Additionally, Susan Sontag's oft-quoted *On Photography* says this of Sander's project:

it was not so much that Sander chose individuals for their representative character as that he assumed, correctly, that the camera cannot help but reveal faces as social masks...Sander's look is not unkind; it is permissive, unjudging. (59)

A curious phrasing, is it not? The double-handed arrangement of a disclosure, a revelation also *being-with* a masking: and this all results in a kind and non-disparaging treatment, an ethical treatment of subjectivity. So, as the essayistic thread in Powers describes Sander as an artist who "unmasks the individual only to restore to the denuded figure the mask of the clan" and then that his *Face of Our Time* series works to "remove the presence of the photographer" and leave us with the trace of the notion that "viewer and viewed are fused into an indivisible whole" (45-46), Powers's fictional, first-person sequence explores similar impressions; in the narrator's quest to learn about the multi-person portrait, they conclude that "I knew now that half of their startled attention focused beyond the lens, beyond the photographer, even beyond the frame, on me" (211). Indeed, these two passages, these "co-existents" if we want to be Barthesian (or Nancian) about it, thematize what Cristofovici refers to as "the problematic separation

between documentary and art photography” (44); problematic because they both reiterate analogous motions of profundity, of a separation that is quite inseparable. Or, as Powers’s essayist says regarding the cultural changes occurring in the early moments of the twentieth century’s second decade, there was “a doctrine of ‘all-at-the-same-time.’ And this simultaneity still holds true today...for simultaneity [was] to set itself up as the new governing condition” (82-83). It is this being-togetherness that brings us back to masked/unmasked, denuded/covered, and individual/clan binaries posited in Powers’s narrative.

In the series of late interviews published as *Ethics and Infinity*, Levinas reaffirms that the face can certainly be subjugated to/by perception but it is also, contradictorily, irreducible to such a state. And then in also speaking of a comparable nudity, a blatant exposure before the Other, Levinas says that:

the skin of the face is that which stays most naked, most destitute. It is the most naked, though with a decent nudity. It is the most destitute also: there is an essential poverty in the face; the proof is that one tries to *mask* this poverty by putting on poses, by taking countenance. (86)

The face can exist as impoverished and therefore may require to be masked amidst the supremacy of such immense disclosure. And in the language of a perfectly photographic allegory, Levinas avows that the Other engages in posing, and while *inauthentic* perhaps, without the responsible reception of me (or the photographer), this posing could continue unchecked. In speaking of Sander’s collected portraiture project, John Berger muses on the possibilities of Sander’s intersubjective *saying*:

What did August Sander tell his sitters before he took their pictures? And how did he say it so they all believed him in the same way? They each look at the camera with the same expression in their eyes. Insofar as there are differences, these are the results of the sitter’s experience and character...but to all of them Sander’s camera represents the same thing. (36)

Berger's tone suggests something emphatically ethical, the difference and the same, a separation and a proximity rendered by Sander's active expressions—for, even if we don't know what was *said*, the traces of these sayings remain etched in the faces that Sander shares with *us*. And while this candid inquisitiveness of Berger stands admirably, Powers's fictive imaginings take this 'sitting,' this posing, a step further in the scene where Sander meets the three peasants on the road. Here, we see a Sander engaging the young men in conversation, as he unpacks his camera equipment, talking to them mostly about socialism (an accurate biographical detail *and* one that lends itself well to the political implications of the communal nature of the ethical encounter), but also about examples of Sander's previous portraiture work. In discussing a subject who the boys already know as a mutual friend, Sander responds with an enthusiasm:

See how he has stopped being the Herr Jacob that you talk planting with and has become, in front of the lens, somebody else...he has stopped being just an individual with a certain year of birth, a certain year of death...he has joined the stream of the universal. (25)

He has stopped *being* an individual, not immortal per se (indeed, birth and death are irrelevant, however?), but has seemingly transcended the world by becoming *somebody else*, by putting on a mask, in other words.

In returning to the point regarding Sander's personal political leanings, Flora Valadie has noted of Sander's membership in a Marxist-influenced artist cooperative, a group whose tenets included the desire

to do away with a bourgeois conception of art in which the artifact is but the expression of an individual conscience. [Sander's] photographic series thus appeared as a form particularly apt to try and find an anonymous, collective voice that would go beyond individual expression. (Valadie)

Sander's philosophy, as *envisioned* by Powers, certainly speaks to the historical veracity of the artist's aims, and a politick rooted in community and interrelationship. Moreover, cannot masks *represent* this sense of anonymity as well? It is in his early essay, "Reality

and its Shadow,” that Levinas states that how in art, “the subject is part of its own representation. It is so not even despite itself, for in rhythm there is no longer a oneself, but rather a sort of passage from oneself to anonymity” (132-133). Gerald L. Bruns reads that “this conversion to anonymity means simply that art turns the sovereign ego out of its house in a disposition that anticipates the trauma or obsession of the ethical relation” (214). So this disposition—or more appropriately: dis-position—should be understood as a simultaneous masking/unmasking of self-identity and a passage into alterity. Just as Herr Jacob has joined the flow of something cosmically benign in his concealment to anonymity, his existence is correspondingly *dis*-closed *through* this same process; if Sander likened “his own project with a mosaic, the elements of which can only be understood when put in relation to one another” (Valadie), the mask thus becomes the *meaning*, per Barthes, the pieces of the whole indeed make the Face of Our Time, thereby *naming* Sander’s endeavor so pertinently.

And this carries us towards the next ‘batch’ of rather interlaced items of Levinasian metaphysics ingrained in the photographic surfaces of Powers’s novel: the face and temporality. Benda Hoymeyr reminds us that for Levinas, alongside language, the face is inescapably linked with his idea of “radical passivity,” that is, the paradoxically stated notion that before the face of the other, in the epiphany of the face-to-face encounter, we have an inherent responsibility for drastic indifference. In other words, in becoming radically unsympathetic to our own suffering, there is a facilitating passion for a sweeping responsibility towards the Other. Hofmeyr contends

that art has the power to effect radical passivity, a contention echoed by Levinas’s tentative but provocative proposal that art might be an activity that endows things with a face. Like the face, I believe that art has the power to address us in a way that stops our indifference and inertia and enables us to act effectively. (Hofmeyr)

Hofmeyr, like the many critics cited previously, recognizes Levinas's hesitant acknowledgment of art's potentialities and in regards to the face, I plan to extend her assessment, towards the gestures within photographic portraiture and its successive genesis and viewing.

In a book-length study on Proust, Benjamin, and Barthes, Katja Haustein posits the Levinasian face (which she keeps untranslated from the original French as *visage*) as ultimately the "relation where the Other is neither like the I nor opposed to it but preserved in his total alterity...the 'visage' is what *transcends* the visible;" it goes beyond the gaze associated with our abilities of perception (47-48). A fine summation, but what are the implications for literature and/or for photography? Haustein, despite offering mostly a focused reading on Proust (a writer quite enamored with portraiture and its many inferences with literature), is quite right to assert that in phototexts, if not read via Levinas, there is always a danger of propagating a look that seeks to annihilate the 'visage' by bringing it within the same realm as the Self, by failing to acknowledge the total alterity of the other, and thereby falling into a trap of endless desire and possession (48). I would extend this and argue that the impetus for such danger of the Self/Other irresponsibility occurs when one ignores, either intentionally or otherwise, the traces of the Seen in any given photographic reading. What makes Powers's phototextual ethics so efficacious are that the characters therein acknowledge this residue, the traces of the ontological Seens to engender an active Seeing, and self-consciously work out these progressions for readers, as we are *all* implicit, Powers would say. Thus, take for example these moments of realization, self-actualization in Powers's novel, all coming in the significant chapter bearing the language of something very Heideggerean, something vividly metaphysical in feeling: "I Dwell in Possibility."

Later in the novel, the first-person narrator from the hybridized fiction/non-fiction thread meets Mrs. Schreck at a party, thus becoming a chance-discovery for she is an ancestor from one of the portrait's three subjects, he comes to learn in talking with her. Thus, they experience something of an epistemological gravitas: "her facts about the photograph—her privileged knowledge that could fill the gaps in my research, her personal experience that could at last cause my reading to coalesce" (203). And this knowledge is further substantiated by the narrator's admitted fears:

I was afraid that Mrs. Schreck's information would lead me to a photo identical to but different from the one that had compelled me so long before. I had dwelled on the one in my memory so long that it was sure to have altered, to have taken on an authority of its own. (203)

Yet, in this *anxiety* before the other-viewer, the narrator recognizes that their selfishness in viewing, up to this point, had been so irresponsible, so consistent of an unprincipled and one-side gaze:

I would be obsessed with finding the exact message the image meant to send *me*, mistakenly looking for it in names, dates, and places...I had to learn that none of it had any real importance, did not in fact exist without active interference from me. The black-and-white print was less a document for archiving that it was a call to action. (209, emphasis in original)

The Self as sole ethical viewer is deceptive and is actually therefore *unethical*. This above scene is the quintessence of something which is precisely analogous to the ontologically being-on-the-way; but, of course, the metaphysical presence granting such ontological disclosures is a fecund sprouting from the *a priori* Saying/Seeing structure existent in the phototextual encounter; the awareness of the image's history allows for the traces of the Seen to inform the Seeing. Further experience of the image, informed by engaging with the Other in Mrs. Schreck, deepens and enriches this idea:

Mrs. Schreck's personal involvement with the picture led me to believe that I had been vain in thinking of it as 'my photo' and 'my farmers.' I was an egoist who dabbled amateurishly in the politics of another time...I had missed and everything, seen nothing. I had missed the conspicuous



link to the photo, to what had first caught my imagination in the museum that day in Detroit. The details that I had committed to memory then had already, in and of themselves, contained all the clues necessary to decode the urgent message of recognition in the picture, the plea for help from those three young men looking over their right shoulders at the photographer no longer present. (204)

This phototextual passage is rich with ethically relevant take-aways. Primarily, this demonstrates the radical passivity of experiential looking that births a ‘visage,’ that *presents* itself between the shared co-viewing of Mrs. Schreck (as Other) and the first-person (“I”) narrator. Furthermore, ideas of temporality play a massive role in Powers’s novel and Levinas’s thought and these the paradoxes of temporal understanding can be often represented by memory: in a present moment we revisit past occurrences (again, past Seens entwine with active Seeings). Additionally, the narrator’s progressing disclosure here is also reminiscent of the main thrust presented by W.J.T. Mitchell in his famous essay-turned-book, “What Do Pictures *Really* Want?:”

pictures are things that have been marked with all the stigmata of personhood: they exhibit both physical and virtual bodies; they speak to us, sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively. They present, not just a surface, but a *face* that faces the beholder. (72, emphasis in original)

Therefore, the ‘ethicality’ in the phototextual presence is many-folded now: the encounters between the characters, thus prompting a “coalescence” (to appropriate the narrator’s terminology) in figural experience<sup>14</sup>; the encounter between the characters and the artwork-as-face, of the photograph as having-facingness that *speaks*; and the encounter of readers to the material phototext-at-large, to the novel that is working-

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14 In a later chapter entitled “The Cheap and Accessible Print” (the Benjamin-Marxist echoes are clear: technical reproducibility may rob a work of its aura but eventually equals access for *all*), the narrator implores of Mrs. Schreck: “at the instant of seeing [the portrait], she had constructed a relation between one figure and a friend of hers whom she had loved more than life...perhaps she would not mind my stopping by for a lesson in how to see” (263). The characters are *Seeing* together, actively building a relationship between themselves, arising out of the relationship between those within the photograph as well.

towards re-*presenting* such ethical layerings. The chapter concludes with the narrator's uncovering continuing:

I could learn nothing by *tracing* the photograph back to its material origin alone. I had to also descend into that...place of possible meaning, find why I recognized these farmers without ever having seen them. (212)

Full circle, perhaps, because Powers opened this chapter with an epigraph from the English philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, who once asserted: "there is no independent mode of existence. Every entity is only to be understood in terms of the way in which it is interwoven with the rest of the universe" (202). It seems one could make a cogent argument, then, for the narrator's Barthesian *punctum* as not merely this superficial familiarity (then perhaps such familiarity is but the *studium*?), but a recognition instead that photographic portraiture can propagate an active understanding of ethical engagement with *all* humans, in the span of *all* the collectivity witnessed through(out) a past, present, and even future, cosmos. Eric Severson, in his book *Levinas's Philosophy of Time*, stresses that for Levinas, "the future is the future of the other; hope itself is a said that carries but traces of the prophetic saying" (265). For Powers's characters, cast across this vast temporal geography, recognition within the framework of a phototextual confronting *is* the meaning, and the responsible encounter therein will indefinitely guarantee the temporal trace to be uncovered at a time that has not yet come to appear.

#### Seeing the Photographic Face

Levinas's metaphysical concept of the face, and the face-to-face collaboration with the Other, while certainly appearing in his early works, becomes more rigorously unraveled through, and throughout, the later masterworks, with *Otherwise than Being* existing as "an intense effort to unpack all of these figural implications of 'the intrigue which forms in the face of the Other'" (Greisch 68). But it was with *Totality and Infinity*,

the so-called 'lead-in' volume to *Otherwise than Being*, that, as Sean Hand claims "is the book which most explicitly criticizes the totalizing vision of previous philosophical systems...[where] Levinas rejects the synthesizing of phenomena in favour of a thought that is open to the face of the other" (5). And in a secondary essay by Jean Greisch, entitled "The Face and Reading," Greisch responds to such matters, suggesting that the

experience of the epiphany of the face—which in Levinas's eyes is 'the experience par excellence'—is also the condition for the possibility of language to such a point that it is from the perspective of this experience that the meaning of speech and expression must be thought. (68)

Indeed, much has been written on this aspect of the face, the experiential Saying within the face-to-face with the Other, but less so in regards to the *Seeing*, to the way that art, especially photographic art, continues to not just "open the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation" (Levinas 76), but to also expand it, deepen it, and enrich it.

Hand's prose above undoubtedly notates the "totalizing *vision*" of ontological paradigms, but how can the always-already present caress of photographic language, the diachronic 'language of vision/vision of language,' operate ethically, both within and alongside the infinite and asymmetrical responsibility to the face of the Other? In other words, how does the fecundity of the figural portrait *represent and enact* the ethical encounter?

As we now know, Levinas's queries on both visual and literary art, and their ethical relationships to the face, often ended with just more questions; for example, in "Is Ontology Fundamental?" he concludes by asking: "can things take on a face? Is not art an activity that lends faces to things" (10)? Or, take these interrogations over a decade later in the essay "Meaning and Sense," where he inquires: "how is the face not simply a *true representation*...to answer this we will have to study the exceptional signifyingness of the trace" (53-54, emphasis in original). A working *towards* some answers to these questions is what this chapter has concerned itself with thus far: the facingness of certain

works of phototextual portraiture *does* help spawn a signification, the trace of the Seen *re-presents* the activity of the ethical Seeing.

Richard Powers's phototextual novel, *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*, is certainly a written example of the ethical working-out of these concerns. While the non-fictional narrative threads in the work, especially those depicting Sander himself, use portrait photography to engender face-to-face discussions between photographic subjects and the artist, the present day fictive thread uses portrait photography's viewing(s) to engender face-to-face encounters between the spectators. We saw how when the narrator uncovers a personal mystery of the August Sander photo, by meeting Mrs. Schreck, who had a personal connection with one of the men in the image. Upon arriving at her house, readers see how the portrait thrusts the characters into an ethical encounter, into an exchange of Saying, based around this Seeing of the material photograph, which embodies distinct traces of the Said/Seen behind its manifestation. Interpenetrated with this ethical encounter of speaking-and-seeing before the presence of the face, Powers's novel structures itself grandly in the communal annals of temporality, spanning the decades that it does, with the characters that it does. As Greg Dawes states, what Powers's project "is describing is the principle of mutual determination. We act as 'our times' biographers *and* we are shaped by our times. Sander provides for an art form that maximizes this mutual determination" (46). *Mutual* determination, *our* times, *we* are formed by this: these are not just the words of an ethical tongue, but entail other equalizing implications, for if Sander's mechanically reproduced images sap the aura from the artwork, they also manifest a joint memory. And these shared temporal experiences temporalize and present themselves as enmeshed with our memory; Powers writes that "memory, then, is not only a backward retrieval of a vanished event, but also a posting forward, at the remembered instant, to all other future moments of corresponding

circumstance” (209). This is a passage that might as well have been lifted from Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*, speaking as it does about the three simultaneously occurring temporal ‘moments.’

Julie Espinosa writes that “scholars warn that photography interrupts authentic, natural memory and overwrites it with artificial narratives fabricated second-hand;” but she portends to proliferate “an argument that, contrary to recent anxieties, photography does not destroy personal memory but instead enables moments of self-encounter that allow for identity-creation” (“The Advent of Myself as Other”). The “scholars” that she is referring to here from earlier in her essay are Sontag and Barthes, and it is Barthes, she reminds us, that “positions photography squarely in opposition to memory. He writes that ‘not only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory...but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory’” (“The Advent of Myself as Other”). Even though Espinosa’s ideas are directed mostly at *self*-portraiture as paradoxically Other—of the ilk of Cindy Sherman—I would extend Espinosa’s assertion and say that photography’s ‘othering’ status (via its supposedly ‘combative’ way of altering memory and thereby altering ourselves) can actually *build* ethical models—and this is something Barthes was working-towards with *Camera Lucida*, as I argued in this chapter; thus I’m not sure if Espinosa’s near bellicose “opposition” phrasing here is entirely accurate. In other words, this is not to say that truth<sup>15</sup> is irrelevant, but I *would* argue that any arrangement that deconstructs and questions our perceived notions of the phenomenological experience—in this case the binaried idea of our sensual memories and counter-memories—is productive and responsible ethical discourse.

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15 See Chapter Four for a more thorough exploration of Badiou’s notions of “truth” as they relate to ethical situationality and the phototextual presence.

How else, then, does Barthes perpetuate his ethical paradigms (or, proto-ethical, as his early rigor is quite transparent and still self-unidentified as altogether ethical)? We saw in this chapter his explanations of other binary pairs aside from this memory/counter-memory idea: the denoted and connoted message as well as the (in)famous *punctum* and *studium* elements that “co-exist.” Michael Fried’s conclusive reading on such ideas in “Barthes’s *Punctum*,” is that Barthes speaks of a *punctum* as existing only in the realm of a particular viewer’s particular subjective experience, when in fact the *punctum* can entail much more than such “literalist notions” (157). Indeed, the *punctum* of a work can exist in its trace, the residue left behind in the (inter)activity between photographer and subject. To reiterate, all these pairings epitomize a Barthesian photo-ethics, and hence can and do work as something of a premier ethical system for engaging with the multifarious matters occurring in my project’s discussion: they exemplify the trouble of symbolic systems representing that which is ‘worth’ figuring; they represent the double-handed co-existence, and thereby deconstructive tendencies, inherent in writing and thinking about photography; and, possibly most importantly, they teach us how to engage ethically with the photographic Other, for initiating, engaging, and perpetuating the face-to-face exchange with this—for this—Other-entity because the responses engendered during the Seen and the Seeing interchange find some solidity *with-in* these terminologies.

By way of a conclusion to the many facets presented in this chapter, I would like to bring in some visual-heavy texts to cinch off any ragged loose ends; the portraiture of Richard Avedon shall serve nicely as such a terminus. In many places over his decades of working, Avedon is observed and noted as commenting on the importance of co-

creation in the photographic portrait between subject and photographer.<sup>16</sup> Avedon considered his *In The American West* series the pinnacle of his decades of portraiture, musing later to his assistant Laura Wilson that “I wish I could have stayed with this project my whole life” (129); he even ventured back to Montana as an old man in his mid-80’s to revisit some of those he met during his time there on this project. But there in Figure 2, we see the portrait of Bill Curry, a drifter Avedon and his team of three assistants met at a café in Yukon, Oklahoma. In Laura Wilson’s biography of the six-year project, *Avedon at Work in the American West*, we see glimpses too of this Avedon co-creative working method. Wilson notes (and provides her own snapshot of) how Avedon “often stood exactly the same way as his subject did. He mirrored the person’s posture unconsciously. I think it was one of his ways of connecting” (20). We also learn that partway through the session, Avedon, the millionaire New York fashion photographer stops to take the homeless drifter Curry’s jacket off, and tuck his shirt in for him (Wilson also has a snapshot documenting this encounter as well); Avedon moves from an active saying leading up to the portrait-making, to *touching* his subject during the session itself. These methods reinforce some key points laid out thus far, as well as those to come in later chapters, especially the subsequent Chapter Three: the active, ethical Saying and

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16 Winthrop Sargeant’s 1958 *New Yorker* article, “A Woman Entering a Taxi in the Rain” may be the most early (and most extravagantly and decadently penned) glimpse into Avedon’s ethical working methods, here specific to female fashion models. Additionally, Erik Palmer in a 2010 piece from *Visual Communication Quarterly* discusses an early Avedon portrait-making method that always “required complicity between the photographer and the photographed” (154), noting also that Avedon’s complicity sometimes even transcended language: “Avedon claims that he would not have made this photograph except under the condition that he had an invitation to proceed, even if the invitation was implicit and unspoken” (Whitney qtd. in Palmer 154). But as Sargeant’s old *New Yorker* article points to, Avedon enjoyed a history of both critical *and* financial success yet despite such a powerful status, we know via this and other biographical sources like Laura Wilson’s book, he still co-engaged with the people he photographed with his highly interactive working methods. As we as viewers only ever see the *traces* of his interactions, all of these materials deepen and enrich that trace, make it *appear* in an even more furrowed and complete way.

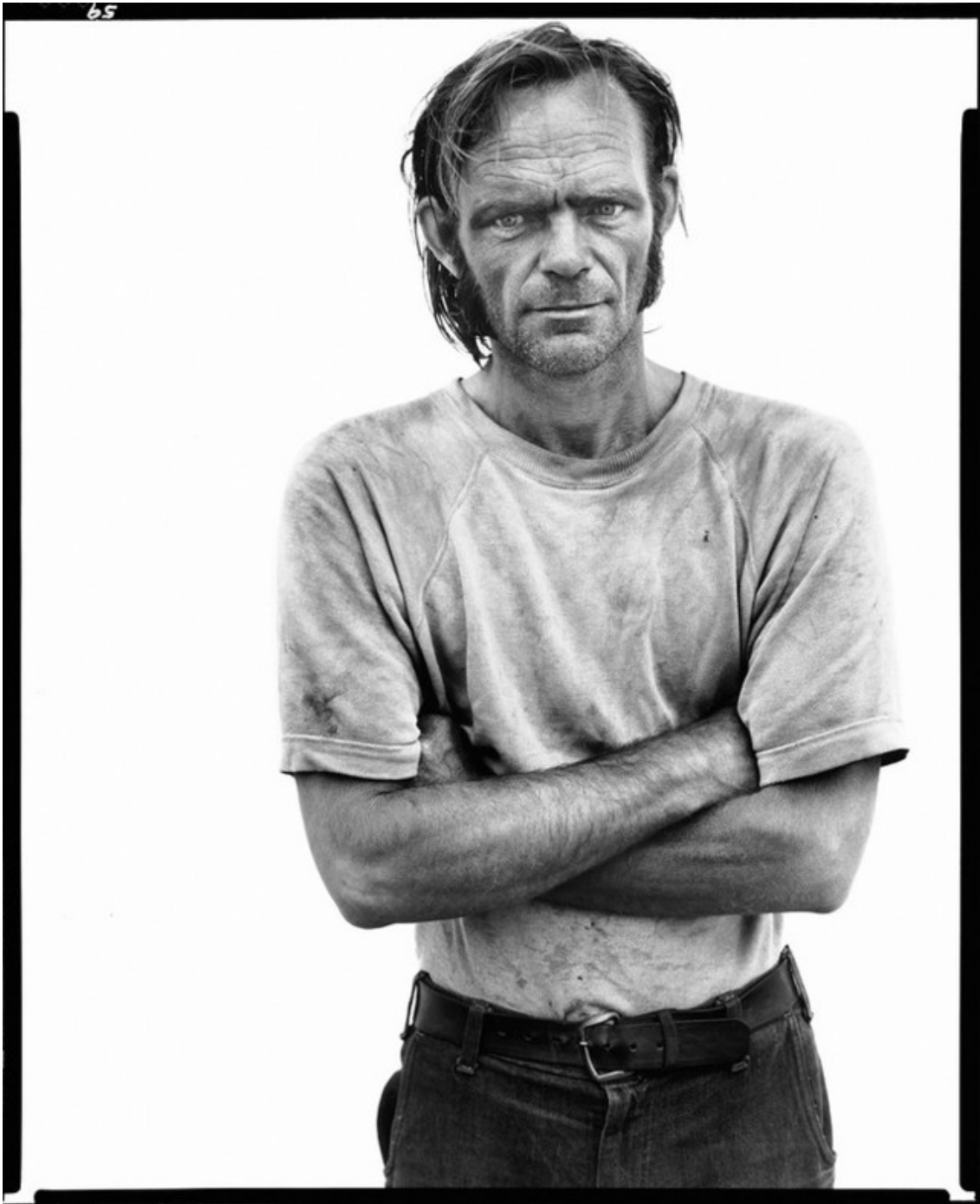


Figure 2--Portrait of Bill Curry



Seeing that occurs while co-creating a phototext. This happens with the Sander character in Powers's novel, in addition to his fictional characters who co-create *meaning* in their gazing of the Sander portrait of the three farmers. And this happens, clearly, in the contemporaneous work of Avedon's imagery—the *punctum* in an Avedon portrait is how the subject is engaging with the photographer/operator/viewer.

Certainly a recurring theme from this chapter is the way things appear in threes: Barthes's third meanings, Levinas's third beings, Powers's triplicate narratives, with all three of these groupings buttressed further by three temporal placements. Thus, it feels apropos for me to offer a final conclusion with something similarly triangular, something triangularized in a double-handed modus, in fact, thereby demonstrating the way that photographic portraiture can generate the optimal, pristine ethical encounter. Again, in returning to Wilson's revealing book of Avedon's *In the American West* series, she concludes the volume with a sort of 'behind-the-scenes' snapshot (Figure 3), in which a subject holding a camera pointed at Avedon looks at us/Wilson, while Avedon holding a print of this same subject pointed at Wilson/us looks simultaneously at this subject, and Wilson, and *us* as implicitly shared viewers, gaze at the entirety of the whole scene. Figure 4 below consists of a diagram I constructed to better conceptualize the dual-handed triangularly ethical allure happening in the photograph of Figure 3.

I realized quite readily—because I *felt* it—that my irrefutable *punctum* upon discovering this image at the end of Wilson's book-as-portrait, my *punctum* is that I am looking at the quintessential and most precisely built and perfectly designed (whether it was intentional or not is irrelevant) triangularized ethical portraiture encounter—again, in a dually-folded manner, hence the truly ethical exchange, as things are based in an equity of the gaze. *This* is the tie that binds, the braided thread that weaves shimmering

helices, across the literature, the portraiture, creating the pluralized phototext, the ethical phototext, where *all* parties are involved and engaged to make meaning together.



Figure 3--Photo of Avedon and subject by Laura Wilson

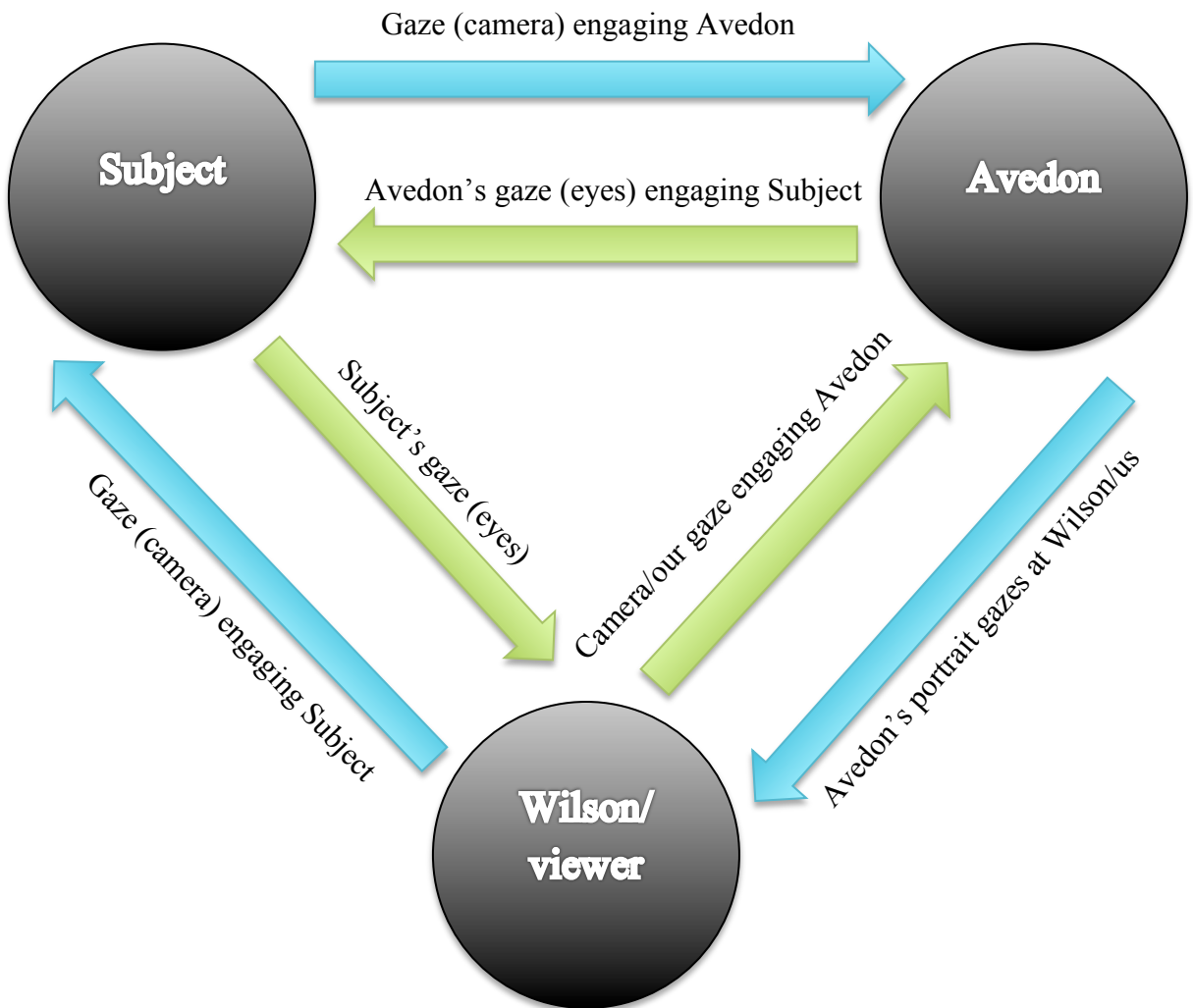


Figure 4--Diagram of bi-triangularized arrangement

### Chapter 3

#### Becoming Hostage to the Photographic Other

“She laughed him off and they pressed on. They made the obligatory exchange of hostages, each giving over the short versions of their overland passage across the intervening decade.”

-Richard Powers, *Plowing the Dark*

“The reality of the war in Lebanon, as all reality in general, is in the image.”

-Vilem Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*

#### ‘They Are Taking Pictures of Taking Pictures’

Firstly, to attempt an introduction, as well as a working-towards of an understanding of Don DeLillo’s phototextual ethics, the discussion must inevitably include (and perhaps even start with?) DeLillo’s now hallowed 1985 novel, *White Noise*. The work has rightly received, and still continues to receive, a vast swath of critical attention, much of which seems to revolve around the premise that the work “exemplifies the analyses of the...sociocultural condition offered by Jean Baudrillard, Frederic Jameson, and Jean-Francois Lyotard, so casting [*White Noise*] as a ‘postmodern prototype’” (Bonca qtd. in Wiese 26). Indeed, one of the most famous scenes from this novel directly involves Baudrillardian photographic-philosophic principles, most markedly the ubiquitous moment early on describing “The Most Photographed Barn in America.” Superficially, I would argue that the appearance of this scene fairly early in the novel helps establish a thematic structure of narrative disorientation begotten by the numerous, and at times even nefarious, matters of visual representation that DeLillo raises. Certainly this scene presents layers of simulation at work and therefore becomes quickly perplexing and

staggering in its reach. Even before arriving at the barn's actual location, the characters Jack and Murray "counted five signs before we reached the site" (12). While this is not only an opening gesture to the oversaturation of marketing and advertising, the billboards represent the larger, and possibly troubling, nature of signification overall: words and pictures standing in to represent "real" things. This fact is further complicated by the mention, at the barn site itself, of "a man in a booth [who] sold postcards and slides—pictures of the barn taken from the elevated spot" (12). Here are two characters—alongside all those others coming from "forty cars and a tour bus in the makeshift lot" (12)—there to witness, to see, and to capture photographers, who are, in turn capturing the barn on film, all while someone sells the same pictures as well, and finally, wholly, further encapsulated by DeLillo's larger fictive, representational narrative.

Secondly, similar motifs are presented in Richard Powers's novel *Plowing the Dark*, published in 2000; the dual narrative threads are set in the late 1980s and early '90s, with one sequence following characters at a Seattle-based research firm developing virtual reality, image-making systems, while the other thread describes the experiences of an American English teacher captured and held hostage outside Beirut, Lebanon. Indeed, TeraSys, the technology company, is in the business of manufacturing images, of negotiating matters of representation; readers quickly find too that Taimur Martin, the hostage of the complimentary narrative strand, is also engaging in image-making routines, however with only his own mind to project the task. But as for the similarities (there are many, as we will see shortly) to the work of DeLillo, take this instance of dialogue between two primary characters in the TeraSys thread, occurring relatively early in their development of "the Cavern," the computer-assisted virtual reality room where representational models are conjured up:

Spiegel sat stilled...I read somewhere that Lascaux has become a simulation of itself? Tourism was killing the paintings. So the authorities built these complete underground replicas so that—”

Lim’s impatience cut him dead. You still don’t get it. They were simulations to begin with. Consciousness holding itself up to its own light, for a look. (130)

Lim is technically not wrong by comparing their Cavern’s three-dimensional, immersive, digital images to those of the Paleolithic paintings on a cave wall in southern France: both caves do deal in visually representative forms. Indeed, the *real* cave paintings, some 17,000 years old, did have commoditized reproductions made as a result of the over-saturation of tourists, and the TeraSys Cavern could potentially, in turn, manufacture a digitally interactive version as well, thus deepening the simulacra; add Powers’s hyperaware literary narrative, and like DeLillo’s barn scene, the levels of mediated re-creation splay out even further.

*Plowing the Dark* will operate in this chapter as a pre-text, of sorts, coming prior to the discussion of *Mao II*. *But* Powers and DeLillo’s phototexts certainly work together in harmoniously ethical ways, though I will posit *Plowing the Dark* as an antecedent (in spite of a later publication date) to *Mao II*, for the principles Powers’s works concern a more fundamental sense: Powers’s considers the Image on a more indiscriminate level, rather than just the Portrait, though the ethical properties remain comparable, hence their grouping in this chapter.

Aside from the transparency of these multiple, figural tiers in both novels, present too is the self-conscious postmodern proclivity for pastiche, as informed readers of both novels experience the traces of various trailblazing soothsayers on photographic theory. These ideas are reinforced by the simple and direct Baudrillardian references, as Wiese referenced above in regards to *White Noise*, such as when Murray utters “They are taking pictures of taking pictures” (12); as readers, we are all but hit over the head with

the levels and layers of simulation at work, of a simulated representation occurring before us. In a way, such allusions do double duty: they demonstrate both a recognition of the presence of representational strata *and* indicate and locate a very specific critic/theorist in Baudrillard, who was enjoying a peak of popularity during the creation and release of these fictive works. Furthermore, in an obvious nod to Benjamin's canonic essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in the *White Noise* barn scene, Murray says to an undecided Jack:

'We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura. Can you feel it Jack? An accumulation of nameless energies...We can't get outside the aura. We're part of the aura. We're here, we're now.' (12-13)

Benjamin's "aura"—essentially, the power of uniqueness and originality in an unduplicated work of art—is experienced here in a kind of deconstructive turn: it is made present all by its total disregard, its characteristics become visible through its invisibility, its presence proliferates via its non-presence. Finally, there are even nods to Barthes's temporal ideas from *Camera Lucida*, of which we saw in the previous chapter, operating in tandem to Powers's first novel, *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*. Again, here is DeLillo's Murray speaking to Jack: "We only see what the others see. The thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future" (12). And if we recall Barthes, who wrote here on looking at the specific portrait of Lewis Payne: "I read at the same time: *This will be* and *this has been*; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake" (96, emphasis in original); Murray's musings appear in the present tense, also alluding to a past and future temporal space, and reflect the similar predicaments troubling Barthes throughout *Camera Lucida*'s second half.

I agree with Annjeanette Wiese, who says of this initial barn scene, that it is one of the "more 'orthodox' postmodern interpretations [and] probably the most referenced moment in the novel *because* of its apt representation of a Baudrillardian simulacrum"



(2). And I also believe the scene certainly aligns with what Jameson says in the opening chapter of his renowned *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*; in the context of talking specifically about the role that photography plays in the contemporary postmodern cultural response to the previous epoch of high-modernism, Jameson states that “[it] is not, I think, a matter of content any longer but of some more fundamental mutation both in the object world itself—now become a set of texts or simulacra—and in the disposition of the subject” (9). I think DeLillo’s opening maneuver does this, calling subject/object binaries into question, and thereby supplanting the formal properties of the photographic image.

But why belabor upon this famous scene from *White Noise*, why appropriate it for my uses here? Especially if I feel, as I do, that it both illustrates *and* obscures DeLillo’s ethical implications for the image? Again, I would argue that certain deconstructionist tendencies are present in this moment—like commenting on an artwork’s aura by showing its absence—and therefore reinforce what I claimed in the first chapter regarding Simon Critchley’s notion of deconstruction as ethical, as *ethics*. Murray’s words to Jack use the realm of figuration as a jumping off point for “the performative enactment of ethical writing” and Jack is not seeking, what Critchley would further identify as, “the simple overcoming or abandonment of ontology, but rather the deconstruction of the latter’s limits and its comprehensive claims to mastery” (8); with the rigor of such thoughts he poses to Jack, Murray is echoing by proxy the same queries DeLillo poses to his readers. But, as we will see, DeLillo doesn’t go far enough with *White Noise* in nurturing a possible fecundity of an ethical and phototextual model.

In fact, this barn scene could even trace a genesis back to criteria espoused by DeLillo in his very first novel *Americana*, from 1971, in which a key moment from that novel is employed by the prodigious visual theorist W.J.T. Mitchell in an epigraph to his

own great work, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*: “One thinks of echoes. One thinks of an image made in the image and likenesses of images. It was that complex” (DeLillo qtd. in Mitchell 11). And thus, even from the get-go of his career with his very first novel, DeLillo is concerned with the role of images and image-making, specifically photography. However, I would assert that the famous barn scene from *White Noise*—and especially the photographic ideas seen *Mao II*, as this chapter will investigate in depth momentarily—adhere even more to what Mitchell articulates in regards to his theory of the “pictorial turn,” which he curiously defines as

not a return to...copy or correspondence theories of representation, or a renewed metaphysics of pictorial “presence:” it is rather a postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visibility, apparatus, institutions, discourses, bodies, and figurality. It is the realization that *spectatorship* (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance, and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of *reading* (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc.). (16)

Indeed, the barn scene begins to toy with preconceived embattlements between text and image, but it is DeLillo’s later works like *Mao II* (as well as the much later *The Body Artist*, which moves beyond even that, in many ways), that truly engage directly with Mitchell’s turn in addition to the Levinasian ethical frameworks this study is interested in tracing. As an example aligning Mitchell’s ‘interplaying’ principles with the ethical, or the photoethical: there is a moment when all four of the chief characters (two male, two female) of the novel are sitting around a dinner table, one of them states (DeLillo curiously, or even purposefully, avoids notating exactly *who* is speaking here in a scene filled only with “he said” and “she said”): “We have the pictures, let’s use them to our advantage. The book disappears into the image of the writer” (71). Collectively, we have the pictures; that is, the portraits of Bill taken by Brita, yet somehow also possessed by Karen and Scott, and these portraits threaten to supplant the writer’s end product, his material, text-based novel; the visual representation of the writer operates in a more immediate, active

Saying to the thematized linearity of the worded narrative, the Said. This is just an opening example of how by *Mao II*, DeLillo begins negotiating the imperative space between figural representation and ethical Levinasian ideals, thereby guiding his fiction down the branch of postmodernist collage, yet still engaging with and encountering substantial ethical frameworks borne with and alongside the pictorial image.

Though in talking about the image holistically across DeLillo's larger oeuvre, Peter Schneck asserts that DeLillo's work with the image "encouraged many readers and critics to think of this American author as someone akin to a literary founding father of postmodern media theory" (104). As we've seen, *White Noise's* barn scene fits this idea quite snugly. Aside from Schneck, other critics like Mark Osteen and Aaron Mauro (the latter in a post-9/11 context with regard to *Falling Man*) have explored in detail DeLillo's proclivities for the image, yet have still done so in a manner almost completely removing the results of ethical engagement from the conversation, or at the very least, only making a passing or covert acknowledgement. While still not addressing the specific literary text, Schneck claims early in an article about the visual poetics of painting in *Mao II*, that

DeLillo's obsession with images as the most obvious symptom of contemporary media culture is much more than a way of criticizing this culture: for DeLillo images are the indispensable key to a contemporary understanding of the human condition in general. (104)

In an essay eight years earlier, Osteen anticipates Schneck somewhat similarly in denoting DeLillo's double-handed (to employ Critchley's suitable terminology) approach to visual and media culture; in regards to *Mao II*,

DeLillo employs photography, Brita's creative medium, in order at once to criticize more sharply the culture that gives rise to spectacular discourse and to acknowledge his own inevitable incorporation within such discourse. (644)

Thus, both Schneck and Osteen seem to assert a Critchleyian, deconstructive, and (postmodern?) double-handedness in that photography is used to both understand and

critique, or embrace and repel, the ever-increasing role of the image, specifically here the *photographic* image.

However, what I would add to this discussion, and something that the two aforementioned critics have not done (though unintentionally as it reaches beyond the perceived scope of their respective studies), is how specifically *portrait* photography is implemented by DeLillo, and how this distinct form of photography operates as a tool for Other-interaction, for engaging *with* the other. And aside from all of these supposed affirmations towards a critical photographic tradition and postmodernism overall, as I've mentioned, what are readers to make of this silence-inducing remark said by the ever-loquacious Murray?<sup>17</sup> It is *words* that give Jack pause: "We've agreed to be part of a collective perception. This literally colors our vision. A religious experience in a way, like all tourism" (12). But, first, why do I choose to start this chapter with a scene so frequently studied before? In short, because it still exemplifies the breadth of DeLillo's workings with the broader notion of The Image; but by *Mao II*, DeLillo narrows in on portrait photography and its related ethical implications, specifically the Levinasian concept of "*the hostage*." Thus, it is this "collective perception," this mutuality, this reference to a solidarity and a spiritual transcendence that makes the scene conclusively intriguing and something that DeLillo will only develop deeper over the course of *Mao II*. In this chapter, I will focus the argument that Powers and DeLillo use the hostage and hostage-taking double-handedly, that is, dually in both a deeply metaphysical *and* linguistically ordinary fashion. And it is within the realm of the image, and then of *the*

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<sup>17</sup> Luce Irigaray devotes much to the metaphysical ideal of silence, as I will show in Chapter Five. But, for now, it suffices just to say how silence constitutes an important element of the meaningful encounter with the actively conversing Other as other. Discourse need not always contain representational dialogue.

*photographic/portrait image*, that these writers are granted the ability to become interlocutors to this very double-handed and ethical discourse.

### Becoming Hostage to the Substituted Other

It is by *Otherwise than Being*, that Levinas most fully introduces the significant metaphysical category of the hostage, of *being* hostage to the other, which arises alongside the inseparable idea of “substitution,” arguably also one of Levinas’s most lasting and contributing hallmarks. Levinas has thusly built upon an earlier, more general theme of responsibility and hospitality (Critchley will devote much ink maintaining how it was Derrida’s writings, especially “The Violence of Metaphysics” that further pushed, or even forced, Levinas to develop his clarity of being hospitable), he has adapted the idea of hospitality (and the host) and evolved with it that of “substitution,” a metaphysical impression quite *indivisible* from the hostage. So, then, what does Levinas mean by this, by substitution, by substituting the Self for the Other? There is an obvious necessity to adequately explore the words of Levinas, and others, regarding these concepts before fusing his thoughts to the phototextual fiction buttressing the argument of this larger project.

In a set of conversational interviews with Phillippe Nemo, designed to present Levinas’s late thought to a more mainstream French audience (and also provide a sort of meta-commentary on the active dialogue intrinsic to the Saying), talks later collected into the straightforwardly titled book *Ethics and Infinity*, Levinas expresses the “non-symmetrical relation” of the intersubjective concern of responsibility:

I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it. Reciprocity is *his* affair...I am responsible even for the Other’s responsibility...subjectivity goes to the point of substitution for the Other. It assumes the condition—or the uncondition—of hostage. Subjectivity as such is initially hostage; it answers to the point of expiating for others. (98-100)

Levinas is demonstrating here a fine nomenclatural progression to his thought: responsibility leads to substitution, which leads, eventually, to becoming hostage. Additionally, as Catherine Chaliel has summarized nicely, “responsibility, this promptness to say “Here I am”...to the Other without taking time to inquire about his reasons, is the very humanity of being...[and] substitution fulfills responsibility” (124-125). Linked concepts, to be sure, but an openness to being responsible for the other, or rather recognizing that “he has been responsible since time immemorial for the Other” (Chaliel 124) must precede their becoming hostage.

In his ever-helpful primer, *The Levinas Reader*, Sean Hand further elucidates the philosopher’s final, matured metaphysical ‘classifications,’ also picking up on Levinas’s ideas of the *unconditionality*, both the state and non-in-difference to the state, of becoming hostage to the Other’s needs:

The original form of openness is therefore my exposure to alterity in the face of the other. I literally put myself in the place of another. Moreover, this substitution is not an abnegation of responsibility, but a passivity that bears the burden of everything for which the other is responsible. I become a subject in the physical sense of being hostage to the other. The unconditionality of this responsibility means that we are always already beyond essence. (88)

Hand’s assertion here is that this unrestricted responsibility is what makes us “always already beyond essence,” and this directly references the subtitle to *Otherwise than Being*, the idea that the non-ontological (the *otherwise than being*) inextricably intertwines with the *extra-linguistic* (the ‘going’ beyond essence of language’s grounding hold); furthermore, this echoes Richard Cohen’s contention that these ideas of responsibility, rising in a weaved simultaneity to becoming hostage via a substitution, that these all comprise the “core of Levinas’s thought” not only of his final work, but his overall thought.

How else do secondary critics read Levinas’s notion of the hostage? Not only is consulting the work of Levinas’s most ardent and dedicated critics helpful in

understanding his admittedly difficult later work, but I feel it keeps in the spirit of pluralistic ethical rigor that this project itself hopes to propagate. As we know, in *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas speaks of the “unconditionality of being hostage” but we haven’t discussed yet how such a ‘state,’ or stance, “is not the limit case of solidarity, but the condition for *all* solidarity” (117). The meta-ethical demands a study of the ethical, thus a formulation of the hostage, and the solidarity therein, demands we consult those in closest proximity to Levinas’s lyrically rich and beautifully arduous thought on such an important matter.

Indeed, as Derrida claims in “A Word of Welcome,” Levinas unquestionably began developing such line of thought in *Totality and Infinity*; it is there in the ‘lead-off’ volume to *Otherwise than Being*, Derrida correctly correlates “substitution” to the earlier “subordination” through the former’s lengthy discussions of/on hospitality. Derrida ultimately asks:

what, then, is this formula “The subject is hostage” doing? It is marking a scansion, a strong punctuation in the unfolding of a logic of *substitution*. The hostage is first of all someone whose unicity endures the possibility of a *substitution*. It undergoes this substitution; it is a subject subjected to it, a subject that submits at the very moment when it presents itself (“here I am”) in its responsibility to others. (55, emphases in original)

Certainly, it is this concept of “substitution” that marks the fully realized, collaborative expansion of Levinas’s thought on the hostage. And Derrida concludes, through his characteristic textual play of italicizing segments in a single word, that making the slight linguistic shift from “*subordination*” to “*substitution*,” or, from *Totality and Infinity* to *Otherwise than Being*, respectively, has rather large ramifications, and I would agree. In *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, Critchley notes regarding substitution that it

is the very subjectivity of the ethical subject, which means that the subject is structured as responsibility to the Other prior to preoccupation with oneself...subjectivity is ultimately described as a ‘hostage’ to the Other; that is the subject is take captive to the point of substituting itself for another. (113)

If subordination is a bowing amidst the face of the other, substitution is that and more: it is placing oneself *in-to* the other from the onset, welcoming, passively, both the becoming of being hostage in addition experiencing to act of initiating and engendering such sensuality simultaneously as other—as Levinas claimed, the Other’s responsibility is even my own concern. This is consistent to what Critchley claims in his later work, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, where he examines the “dividualism” of Levinas’s late work:

my relation to the other...is the obsessive experience of a responsibility that persecutes me with its sheer weight. I am the other’s hostage, taken by them and prepared to substitute myself for any suffering and humiliation that they may undergo. (60-61)

The Self is therefore responsible and welcomingly hospitable to any discrimination they may experience, even at the hands of the persecutor themselves. Indeed, as Critchley concludes, if one were to only take a cursory look into the biography of Levinas and the fate of his family as Lithuanian Jews amid World War II, this philosophy takes extraordinarily high ground. But in context to some of this very same vocabulary, Critchley will also assert in *Infinitely Demanding*, that Levinas’s “ethical language,’ composed of [such] several strange, wonderful, and hyperbolic terms” allows for “the extreme claims” to be made through such language (60), and that finally, satisfactorily, *this* at last adheres to demonstrating a trace of the authentic, ethical Saying.

Derrida in yet another important late essay, “At This Very Moment In This Work Here I Am,” the last in a series of several interlocutions posited directly to Levinas—thereby truly stressing the meta-ethical, present-tense Saying as the title implies—offers an extremely close reading of *Otherwise than Being’s* language. Derrida scrutinizes numerous textual instances where, among other things, Levinas broaches the conversation on the hostage, and by doing so, Derrida is engaging with and offering an appreciative response to Levinas’s Saying ‘technique,’ thus double-handling



deconstructing and reconstructing his idea of the hostage. Through Derrida's analyses in "At This Very Moment" of *Otherwise than Being's* principles of substitution and the hostage, he is demonstrating the ethicality inherent to deconstruction; in *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, Critchley, in turn, even asks if Derrida's essay "allows one to judge whether Derrida's problematic has developed as a whole, and in particular *vis-à-vis* the question of ethics" (11). This re-illuminates the arguments I raised in Chapter One, that the meta-ethical presence is fundamental to all ethical discourse. Derrida's "At This Very Moment" reinstates this viewpoint.

I would also like to add here that many—Derrida and Critchley included—have no qualms about valuing *Otherwise than Being* as 'better' because it is more sufficiently speaking on what it has been 'designed' to speak about, for its paramount ability to illuminate the meta-ethical: using the clearest ethical principles and ethical 'vocabulary' to elucidate on ethical frameworks.<sup>18</sup> Robert Bernasconi and Critchley, in their editorial introduction to the compendium, *Re-Reading Levinas*, also indicate that: "*Otherwise than Being* is far more attentive to the sort of problematic generated by deconstructive reading than *Totality and Infinity*" (xiv); again suggesting that Derrida's role as Levinas's consistent, rigorous, and respectful interlocutor is one of influential significance. Relatedly, I suppose one too could make the argument that the prose of *Otherwise than Being* is more lyrical, more lush—I, for one, appreciate the flow of his language, beyond just making a directed meta-point on the importance of language and the Saying. But the concept of the face, as the prime example, is clearly more developed in *Totality and*

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<sup>18</sup> I think I should now mention here that the phototextual works, both literary and visual, studied in Chapter Two of this project are not 'inferior' to those up for discussion here in Chapter Three; and the ethical structures and fecund portraiture existent in the works below do not surpass, and are not more elevated or evolved than those of Chapter Two. In short, the ethical caresses felt in *Totality and Infinity* are felt *inseparably* from those in *Otherwise than Being*.

*Infinity*, and actually *had* to be developed more there, *a priori* to any discussion that could or would involve moving beyond essence, being otherwise than being.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, I would say that in terms of the literary and philosophical pedigree of ethics (and deconstruction as ethics, as Critchley indeed notes in so many places), Levinas's concepts of the hostage and substitution *are* paramount. Yet, these theoretical contributions pale in comparison, perhaps, to the larger corollaries of such contributions as metaphysical doctrine spanning something *para*-textual, as we shall see.

With these ideas—the hostage, substitution—Levinas is making his outward departure from the thought of Heidegger even more transparent and visible. By undeniably moving *beyond* the “extra-linguistic” of the essence and the describing the “non-ontological” that is something otherwise than being, Levinas here asserts that it is not a being-toward-death that concerns his writings, and instead that it is a denuding (as we saw in Chapter Two), or an extreme exposure to the face of the other, by subjecting to the point of becoming a hostage to their alterity. Indeed, in earlier chapters we saw how Levinas implored *of* relationships to the Other via the face-to-face interaction; these are the cruxes of *Totality and Infinity*. However, by the final masterwork, *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas's hostage-alterity fully enunciates its significance by going *beyond* the edict of the face, by engaging with a full substitution of one for the other, and thus allowing for the proximal barrier to give way to full passivity, to unencumbered responsibility. It is this indication of substitution that committedly precedes the

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<sup>19</sup> Metaphysically speaking, that is not to say that ‘seeing’ the other face-to-face occurs *a priori* to the call of responsibility, just that in terms of constructing a written argument of sophisticated philosophic rigor, this concept needs extrapolating *before* those discourses on responsibility that are born from the substitutional encounter, from becoming hostage. Levinas's conversation with Phillippe Nemo in the “Responsibility for the Other” chapter from *Ethics and Infinity* does a fine job, I think, of succinctly and lucidly speaking to this point of understanding what responsibility for the Other is and *where* it is met: as face.

ontological Self-based query, therefor allowing Levinas to reaffirm, clarify, and offer a gesture of something towards a closure of his metaphysical and ethical project.

### The Hostage as 'Beyond Essence' in Powers

The first subsection of this chapter introduced some general and previously understood ways that Powers and DeLillo—the latter as an oft believed figurehead for the postmodern American novel—have engaged and attempted to reconcile with the 'problems' of the image, of figural representation. The second subsection briefly outlined and opened some important ideas of Levinas, and related thinkers, regarding the ultimate manner by which one becomes responsible to the other, by substitution and becoming an unencumbered and unquestioning hostage. This third section will delve more deeply into the thoughts of the previous two, pluralistically combining Levinas's *own* words from *Otherwise than Being* alongside the ideas seen in DeLillo's *Mao II*, his next great novel following *White Noise*, as well as Richard Powers's *Plowing the Dark*, which I will argue, both use specific forms of representation, and specifically portrait photography in the case of *Mao II*, to seek out the ethical encounter with the Other through hostage-becoming—both literally and metaphysically. This third section will comprise the bulk of the present chapter.

Truly, we see that a central theme of both *Plowing the Dark* and *Mao II* is the notion of the hostage—the epigraph to this chapter comes a scant six pages into Powers's four-hundred plus page novel, and not only demonstrates his penchant for thematic foreshadowing through lyrical, metaphorical flourish (here specifically showing the emotions that arise when old friends (and lovers) meet again after many years apart), but also cueing us off to a major motif: the hostage. Yet, at first glance, readers of both the Powers and DeLillo texts experience that which is a more traditionally (i.e. the non-

metaphysical, the non-philosophical) understood idea of the hostage: someone bound and imprisoned, against their will, to the demands of another. Both novels involve characters captured and held by 'foreign' entities, both depicting the capturers as coming from Middle Eastern terrorist cells, both from Beirut, Lebanon, in fact. Can readers of both the Levinasian, metaphysical hostage and the more generally understood, 'mainstream' definition, as superficially seen in the fictive worlds of DeLillo and Powers, associate these terminologies beyond their literal significations? In other words, do these identical words do identical things, despite existing as different on a surface level? But this of course goes beyond mere word similarity: I portend that Powers, and DeLillo, *are* actually using the word "hostage" here beyond its simple literal conception, that they are employing it "beyond essence," that they use the hostage and the act of hostage-taking to engage in important commentary on the metaphysical other in the postmodern America of the late 20 century. To put it another way, I argue that Powers and DeLillo use hostage-taking double-handedly, dually in both a metaphysical *and* concrete manner. I would also argue that their uses of a so-called 'Orientalist Other' actually aid in the fictions' goals of affirming and clarifying that they offer multi-vocal comprehensions of the hostage. Finally, it is within the jurisdiction of the Image, and then of *the photographic and photographic portraiture image*, that allows these writers the best ability for becoming interlocutors of this very double-handed and very ethical discourse.

*Plowing the Dark*, like many of Richard Powers's novels, is built and plotted in a bi-threaded manner. One thread of the narrative is about the Cavern (the nod here to Plato becomes quickly apparent), a pioneering virtual-reality room developed by a Seattle tech company called TeraSys. When the novel opens, it's the late 1980's (like DeLillo, Powers uses television news media to situate and contemporize the background, also curiously similar in chronological setting), and Steve Spiegel, former poet and now a

programmer for TeraSys persuades Adie Klarpol, an old lover, friend, and central character to the Seattle story strand, to escape New York City and her commercial art livelihood to produce virtual, navigable art in the Cavern's groundbreaking interface. Over the course of the novel, Adie and Steve rediscover the nature of art and each other, alongside an emotionally vibrant cast of other programmers and hardware specialists. Powers's other plot concerns Taimur Martin, an American-born teacher of Iranian descent, taken captive in Beirut. Taimur spends most of the novel in this captivity, relying almost entirely on his memory and imagination to construct a similarly representational world as Adie's, though only using the 'virtual reality' of his mind. Taimur and Adie never *physically* meet, but their narrative threads cross thematically in many instances throughout, and there is a kind of climax to be found when Taimur experiences a transcendent vision of Adie as an ascending figure in a vast Byzantine nave.<sup>20</sup>

Richard Powers has stated in an interview<sup>21</sup> that his novels typically address unanswered problems from earlier writings, that he is always working out certain unresolved issues: "I've always conceived of each new book as an answer to the previous one...many of my later themes are there [in *Three Farmers*] in embryo...the ideas here about the bidirectional relation between narrative and cognition" (16). Thus, even though *Plowing the Dark* does not deal with photography nearly as much as *Three Farmers* does, as we saw in Chapter Two, Powers is indeed tackling the larger notion of the figural and its subsequently received perception between/amongst individual entities; the problem of how we use images, words, and even thoughts to represent material objects and bodies. And I find Powers's use of the phrase "bidirectional relation"

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<sup>20</sup> I credit the *Publisher's Weekly* review from June of 2000 to be of some minor aid here in offering such a succinct summary, something that is so often difficult to achieve with a Powers novel.

<sup>21</sup> With Jim Neilson, see *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 18.3 (1998): 13-23.

curiously revealing; of course, *Plowing the Dark* employs a multi-threaded formation, as almost all of his works do, where only by the climax do the threads fully coalesce. But throughout the track of the novel, especially *Plowing the Dark*, readers feel the *traces* of these linkages when the threads—and the characters in them—encounter one another: thus his locution “bidirectional relation” practically feels synonymous to “ethics.”

Relatedly, in an essay by Powers entitled “Being and Seeming: the Technology of Representation,” of which Trey Strecker accurately declares: “might serve as a companion” to *Plowing the Dark* (191), Powers structures a bi-lateral discussion positioning highly technical digital representation and analog art in a series of conversations between himself, as narrator, and a second-person “you,” as reader, again dropping the essay into a textual practice recognizing the dually-directional exchange where neither form of representative methodology is ‘better’ than the other, and in fact, the supreme usefulness of digital representation may be its ability to refresh us to the irreducible complexity of the analog world (17). So not only is the subject matter of the essay dealing with negotiating the different imagistic mediums, its presentation of said subject matter unfolds in a comparably ethical modus—again: “the ethical is inherently meta-ethical.” The two threads of *Plowing the Dark* are narrated similarly, yet in an ever more nuanced way: the Seattle/Adie Klarpol thread is in the past-tense and omnisciently voiced, while Taimur’s thread occurs in the present tense and is narrated in the second-person (*we become* Taimur, *we become* Taimur). Yet are such exchanges ‘equal?’ Does not the idea of Powers’s ‘forcefully’ speaking for his reader in the aforementioned essay, as well as in the novel’s Taimur-thread, betray any sort of ethical Saying, regardless of the fact that stream is *said* in a present tense narrative voice? Indeed, this “bidirectional relation,” in all their narrative forms, I would argue, was never meant for a proportional construction, and this segues well into the metaphysical concept of “the

hostage” where a chief proponent therein involves the complete prostration before a significant Other.

When Taimur first entertains the reality of his *hostage-ness*, he naturally struggles at first, and even with the language of the concept itself:

Hostage: each passing day adds another letter to the hangman’s word. It grows hourly harder to deny that you’ve become the next victim in a serial crime that you thought had exhausted itself in pointlessness...

‘Am I a hostage?’ you ask the guard, the knife-voiced one... ‘Chef say you no hostage. America lets our brothers in Kuwait go free, you go free’

Not a hostage: just some collateral pawn, held for imaginary

leverage in a game where no one can say just what constitutes winning. Word must be out by now, whatever the word is. (100-101)

Clearly at first, Taimur (and Powers’s) notion of the hostage is quite literal. Taimur is merely *presented* here, and he recognizes it, as a sort of bargaining chip where the desired exchange is anything but metaphysical.

In a key turning point in Taimur’s imprisonment, he ruminates on the connections between being hostage and the selfhood, brought on not only by his attempts at speaking in the language of his captors, but through his perpetual mental image-making exercises, labors that mirror the computer-aided efforts of Adie in the Cavern narrative, all designed, as Taimur says “to make sense of the senseless” (146). Expressions of figuration guide both Taimur and Adie’s experiences. In his isolation, Taimur narrates that the “hostage has but one place to return to, one owner, one prevailing emotion. All it knows is a thinly delineated, horizon-wide boredom” (185). Here Taimur (some 150 days into his captivity—a mere fourth of his total captive time) begins his shift of associating being hostage with being selfishly and inwardly reflexive. Towards the closing of *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas says that:

peace is under my responsibility [and that] the neighbor cannot relieve me of it...I am a hostage, for I am alone to wage it, running a fine risk, dangerously. This danger will appear to knowing as an uncertainty, but it is transcendence itself. (166-167)

Taimur recognizes that being hostage here does not correspond to merely just the Self, per se, but that he cannot wait, or even hope, for a reciprocity; and thus being hostage allocates power to the reign of boredom in this always-postponing for a transcendence. This is also why this scene markedly denotes a shift in Taimur's characterization, while before his uncertainty of the situation dominated (Power's does a wonderful job really illustrating the insecurity and despair felt by Taimur in prior scenes), with this longish chapter, Taimur is clearly working vigorously down the path to the clearing of transcendent clarity, as we will see in a moment.

But, first, despite some possibly slight tangential peril, I wish to say a bit more on this notion of boredom as corresponding closely to the Self and Other relation, for both Heidegger and Levinas speak on this metaphysical principle of boredom and, I would argue, Powers's usage is curiously, illustratively, similar. In his essay, "What is Metaphysics?" Heidegger explores boredom (and dread) as some means used by entities to forego the creeping acknowledgment of being-toward-death and nothingness. Levinas also speaks on boredom in early works like *Existence and Existents*: "reaching for the other is not something justified of itself; it is not a matter of shaking me out of my boredom" (Levinas qtd. Crangle 83). So how does Taimur attempt to reconcile his boredom of being in his cell? Via man-made, interiorly representational means, of course (as opposed to the visual VR environments of Adie et al's Cavern).

For like Levinas, who exposes the paradox that the bored individual can single-handedly alleviate his or her own boredom (Crangle 83), Taimur seeks to engage in Othering encounters, with both his captors *and* by manifesting figural tapestries from his own mind: the purely solitary existence cannot mitigate boredom wholesale. After all, as



Levinas also notes in his late 1982 essay “Diachrony and Representation” regarding the interiority of self-dialogue: “one must ask if this very discourse, despite its allegedly interior scissions, does not already rest on a prior sociality with the Other where the interlocutors are distinct” (102). In other words, dialogue with the Self can only come *after* dialogues with the Other: Other-encounters with language—and other representational, figural, and Image-making forms, these *beyond-language* forms—exist *a priori* to similarly held dialogues of interiority. Does not dialogue with the Self *have* to be representational (and thus ‘inferiorly’ Said) if no other entity is around for the present-moment exchange, for the illumination of the active Saying? Do we not “think” in images, in representational and symbolic arrangements? <sup>22</sup>

After Taimur is struck in the face, feeling as if his “head is split” and like there is a “second face growing from your face” (183), we see how Powers’s will use the powerful representationally-active centers of the human mind to engender how a lone man can still engage in dialogues with Others, both present and not, can create moments of Saying, of a lively *Seeing*. Taimur begins with self-questioning, in his confinement, if he even needs people anyways, for did he not shun human contact in his old life back in the States? The following passage is worthy of citing at length for it noticeably demonstrates the beginning of a transformation:

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<sup>22</sup> Rudolf Arnheim, beginning in the 1960s, wrote frequently and famously, as an ‘art psychologist,’ contending that *all* thinking (as opposed to just thinking on the varied forms of visual art) is perceptual in nature. Furthermore, philosophers working in the tradition of phenomenology, thinkers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jacques Lyotard, and Jean-Luc Nancy place great stock in the “bias of the figural,” as Lyotard once called it in *Discourse, Figure*. In addition, as Victor Burgin says of phenomenology: “the only thing I can be *certain* of about the material world is that I have mental representations of (it)” (37). But for Lyotard, there are “possibilities that point ‘*beyond representation*’” in our recognition that texts are *things* to be watched, to be gazed upon, even as sites of a Marxist consumption, but only if both the figure and language are mutually implicated and enmeshed to/with one another, in a braided and parallel structure as the Saying/Said.

Can you really need people that much? Each day widens your disbelief at the discovery. You wanted this solitary confinement. You made love to the idea. The whole reason you came to this country in the first place was to escape human connection...You came here hoping to reclaim your life, to sail over the edge of society into selfhood's new world. But isolation warps you into someone you don't recognize. You feel the thing in all its nakedness: a need so great that you'd stupidly tried to shed it. Your invitation to the human party...that petty, niggling burden. Your trueing, your delight, your sanity, your only health. Others. Solitude proves how little of you is yours. Everything that you've ever thought, everything you've ever felt, you owe to that company you could never abide...you vow to study that dependent self you never looked at, to converse with it everyday from dinner until bed...surely some core must exist inside you, some essence that you haven't simply sponged from a world of others. (187-188)

Here, Taimur begins a shift. He realizes the inherent dangers of the solitude of the Self, the potentially harmful inauthenticity of it. Yet also in vowing "to study that dependent self" he plans to converse with it as Other. So while he tries, and succeeds at times to engage with his captors, as we saw with his earlier crude attempts at language, Taimur is fully amidst a conquering of his Heideggerian-style anxiety of being-in-the-world.

In his introduction to Levinas's *Time and the Other*, Richard Cohen mentions how by Levinas's other early work, *Existence and Existents*, Levinas began to explore "subjectivity's desire to get out of itself, to rid itself of itself to "save" itself from the mastery and burden of its material self-relationship" (6). Taimur's progression of thought seemingly mirrors Levinas as he moved from *Existence and Existents* and towards the line of reasoning found in the pages of *Time and the Other*: Taimur recognizes how detrimental his "intimate self-enclosure" (Cohen 7) can be, so he engages not only in a "departure from self [but also] a return to self. The present consists in an inevitable return to itself" (55), as Levinas states in *Time and the Other*. Taimur departs and returns from the Self, finding an inward Other. But Cohen continues:

To characterize time solely in terms of the subject's originary self-relationship, the materiality of the instant, with its self-mastery and fatigue, is insufficient because the subject is mired in itself...the subject saves itself by...'loosening the bond between the self and the ego.' (6-7)

To be clear, what I am arguing here is that it is Taimur's face-to-face encounter with *himself*, which is both Self *and* Other (his face has metaphorically split, we recall, and that there is a new face thriving *from* his other face) that we are witness to. Again, as we saw in the previous chapter, Levinas asserted in *Time and the Other*, in a subsection of that same name, the "relationship with the future, the presence of the future in the present, seems all the same accomplished in the face-to-face with the Other" (79). And how does Taimur have this paradoxical discourse of both Self and Other? Through the evocation of the visual, through the rigors of mental figural representation in both language and in imagery. Again, as we just saw above, he "vows" to learn from his "dependent self" (and here, again, as also Other) by "replaying every detail of your life you can remember" (188). But how did Taimur even get to this place, what initiated his thoughts on the matter? Through the self-composed image, the visualization in his head (and interestingly mirrored by Adie and the Cavern's techno-graphical manifestations).

In further regarding this idea of the Levinasian hostage, one must also correspondingly explore the thinker's imperative associative principles of the maternal. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas makes the (in?)famous<sup>23</sup> analogy of bearing ethical responsibility to that of a maternal body, of carrying the Other, nurturing them, yet all

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<sup>23</sup> According to the renowned Lisa Guenther:

while some feminist readers have criticized Levinas for romanticizing mothers' self-sacrifice without acknowledging the political conditions of this sacrifice, others have also found in his work the starting point for a feminist ethics of maternity. (119)

Guenther's own reading places emphasis on Levinas's simile, by stressing "the word *like* in [the phrase: 'like a maternal body'], I wish to destabilize any strict correlation between women and mothers, or even between motherhood and responsibility" (119-120). In other words, one need not give actual birth to become a maternal body, one can still carry responsibility "as if she were my child" (120). Finally, Guenther also directs her readers to Tina Chanter's important anthology, *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas* for the "range of different feminist responses" (133) to Levinas's concept of the maternal body, a reference that I would second as significant, for what that's worth, to this conversation.

without assimilating them *into* the role of the Same. As Guenther notes, for Levinas, “the maternal body is not only a host...but also a *hostage* for the Other, unable to extricate herself from a responsibility that she did not actively undertake, but to which she was already assigned by the Other” (119).<sup>24</sup> Deeper into Taimur’s captivity, Powers’s certainly ups the ante on the ethical paradigms by linking not only the commonplace notions of the hostage to metaphysical conceptions, but also suggesting maternal metaphors that operate in a relatedly Levinasian vein.

For example, Taimur, amidst one of his quite prolonged figural episodes, conjures his Iranian mother:

hers was the countenance of love, to circumspect for any photo to have captured. This is the mask of happy sacrifice. The face of the most maternal being that a child could conceive. Your icon for safety, for every comfort and care ever taken for granted. Your weight, your shame, your memory, your mother. (232)

Obviously, the passage here is imbued with some hardy syntax from the lexicon of metaphysical terminology: “love,” “face,” “maternal,” “care.” And the passage is linked, too, with notions of the image: “photo,” “icon.” How does this all work in tandem then? As Taimur literally wills his mother’s face into existence, her details read like the gazing upon a photographic portrait: “her full-tipped nose swims into *focus*...a haunted face, a hunted one. *Framed* in that copper coif of composure...Pahlevi copper. Before that, in pictures, Pahlevi blond” (230). These moments perhaps even harken back to the previous chapter, to Powers’s first novel rich with references of photographic portraiture. But these moments all work together in that Taimur’s figural renderings propagate a language of Saying *and* Seeing, here made more vigorous by the maternal

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<sup>24</sup> While I did not, perhaps consulting Guenther’s recent book on solitary confinement could also be useful in painting this connection between the maternal and the hostage? Without straying too far outside the scope here, it may prove intriguing to at least acknowledge this particular path of scholarly inquest regarding an unwilling, individualized captivity.

evocation. Take as an additional example of this notion, the moment when Taimur is pleading to learn the names of his captors and he asks for their real names; the maternal imagism is further described by Powers through associative motherly allegory<sup>25</sup>, and engendering, in turn, a premier ethical encounter:

somewhere in your childhood's forgotten Qur'an, in the watered-down hadith that you ingested with your mother's milk, you recall a massive prohibition against lying. "Sayid," he says. Soft as his shoulders' shrug. Ashamed. You hug him across this infinite gap between you. (241)

Instilled with the ability to recall a cultural language, a recollection following representational manifestations of his mother's face, Taimur is able to close, or at least negotiate, just a bit more, the paradoxically infinite yet tangibly small chiasmus of distance *and* proximity. This relates to what Ewa Plonowska Ziarek has written, in that it is "this irretrievable past event of birth given by others that constitutes an ethical subject as always already welcomed and being with others" (226). Taimur, as a representative of "the corporeal ethical event" of birth, is thus able to exist as an ethical subject again, welcoming and willing to substitute himself as hostage, even if just for a fleeting moment. And these moments, these *instants*, came into being via his figural faculties, by his mind's ability to create a portrait of his deceased mother once more.

While the majority of this chapter thus far has certainly concentrated mostly on one of the two threads existent in *Plowing the Dark*, the TeraSys narrative of Adie et al. is not without its important contributions. For again, mirroring Taimur's figural constructions bounding from his mind, Adie's interactions with art on the other hand come into being by

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<sup>25</sup> Later in this same section, Taimur refers to his imprisonment as "a nine-month gestation," implying that he is being 'carried' along *towards* something in a positive sense, to a grand birth of sorts, rather than just wasting and dying in a dank and dirty cell.

means of an apparatus<sup>26</sup>, whether it is a virtual reality-making supercomputer or, in the following case, a simple camera. And one of these longish moments will serve well into a discussion of DeLillo's *Mao II* and thus the closing of this chapter.

When Adie visits the home of Karl, another old mutual artist friend of hers and Steve's from New York, and recruited by Steve far prior to Adie's own courting, she finds on his "largest wall," drawn to it "by a burst of images pasted to it," that no less than "several hundred photographs covered its surface in an unbroken collage" (281). This massive collage is made up of various portraits of a performance artist named Gail Frank that Karl was once in love<sup>26</sup> with, and whom Karl thinks also happens to look uncannily like Adie. It turns out Gail committed suicide, or so the story went, as a possible final act of performance art. But in one of the images that Karl directs Adie's attention to, Gail seems dead, lying on a sidewalk, limbs akimbo. At first, Adie thinks that Karl has captured Gail's actual death, the moment she hit the pavement. It turns out that Karl has merely captured Gail performing a piece on Wall Street: "*You don't understand*, he said, *she's not dead yet...I mean here. She's not dead yet, in the picture. In the photo I took of her*" (286). Karl's words certainly do much to refer back to the discussion in the previous chapter, the notions of Barthes, Berger, and Sontag: the way that death and

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<sup>26</sup> My use of the word *apparatus* here, and elsewhere later on, is much more than a syntactic 'placeholder' and does indeed operate as a specific and intentional nomenclatural choice. Thus, I find Vilem Flusser's following definitions of this word, cobbled together from various parts of his *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, particularly useful:

an overarching term for a non-human agency, e.g. the camera, the computer...apparatuses were invented to simulate specific thought processes...all apparatuses are calculating machines and in this sense 'artificial intelligences,' the camera included...in short: apparatuses are black boxes that simulate thinking.

This is of course relevant because Powers's novel seeks to, with much rigor, mend this simulation, hence demonstrating the shared ethical encounters that can come from *all* image-making techniques, whether from the biological human mind (in Taimur's case) or through an apparatus (in Adie's case).

photography tamper with and/or heighten temporal understandings and experiences, the way that death is both always-already present and not present at all, paradoxically. But in a Levinasian turn, Karl questions the tenants of an iconoclasm:

I shouldn't have been tempting fate. A person should never represent anything that they aren't willing to have come true...we know what we paint. And everything we paint comes into the world somehow. That's why God put the kibosh on graven images, you know. (287)

In seeing his troubled state, his feelings of remorse, of a possible *responsibility* for Gail's death, Adie "crossed the gap between them. She put her arms around him" (287), echoing, almost verbatim, the ethical encounter experienced by Taimur and Sayid in the parallel narrative, the Beirut thread. In short, the figural of the phototext has once more engendered the ethical exchange; it is the power of the image that has brought them together, physically and metaphysically.

Furthermore, additionally imperative about this scene is the moment when Adie discovers, upon much closer inspection, that Karl's images are actually paintings rendered free-hand from photographs; Karl remarks:

I painted everything from photographs. It's absurd isn't it? I mean, what's the point? A photorealistic copy of a real photo. The camera can do everything the hand can do, a million times easier and more effectively...except be the hand. (286)

And when Adie steps away from the huge wall, as far back as she can go, she sees that all of the smaller images (again, paintings made from photographs), in turn, form a larger image:

suddenly each individual picture—each discrete pattern of light and dark—diffused...where there had been hundreds of images, there now was just one: a single, gaping composite of a female face. But exactly whose face, the composite lack the resolution to disclose. (288)

For, as we recall from the previous Chapter Two, the face, in the metaphysical sense, does not *represent* something biological, something tangibly graspable and seeable: indeed, disclosure evades if one is to expect seeing an ethical face as such.

This seems like the most ideal transition into DeLillo's work, the talking about making pictures from and of pictures, as well as the talk about moving from painting towards photographs (thus resonating the idea of reality to virtual reality?). Indeed, readers 'see' a portrait of Gail in a state of suspended death-but-not-death, a small portrait (which is part of one larger portrait) painted from a photograph 'painted' from *real* life: the DeLilloean-grade levels of a Baudrillardian simulacra become familiar: the "hyper-real," the Copy. It's all here. Perhaps Powers's point is a bit heavy-handed: the apparatus can always do everything more efficiently, *ad infinitum*, of course, except genuinely replicate the human mind itself. This is understood. But what Powers's perhaps lacks in brevity, he makes up for with ethical prowess, rising up from the layers of figural clout.

#### DeLillo's Phototextual 'Appearing' in *Mao II*

If Powers implements the primacy of language of words and the subsequent, though certainly non-inferior and correspondent, (en)visioning of language to engender conversations with the Other—an Other often felt both as Self and as unique Other—it is DeLillo who will use the language of vision, of material photography in both process and product, to carry out similar ethical tasks related to ideas of the hostage. Not only is a central character a portrait photographer who engages others in conversations about photography, identity, and memory all whilst taking their picture, DeLillo's chapter breaks contain actual photographs relevant to the narrative itself. I would portend, then, that the



parameters of DeLillo's phototextual ethics are more clearly delineated, more 'obvious,' though I do not mean to imply these are 'stronger' than Powers's methodologies.

DeLillo's novel *Mao II* is, broadly speaking, a sort of metafictional treatise on writing and representation, representation that is both visually and linguistically rooted, as we began to see in Chapter One. It is the story of a reclusive, highly regarded novelist Bill Gray who often muses on the role of being a reclusive, highly regarded novelist. Indeed, as a hermetic writer, Bill is held hostage to his own neuroses for wanting to keep his writing unadulterated by refusing to appear and exist publicly, but Bill is also somewhat held captive in a physical sense by his assistant, Scott; "Scott now holds him hostage, taking over the way a 'disease takes over a life' (Osteen 650), for Scott also wants to 'protect' Bill from the outside world. The character Brita is a photographer working on a portraiture project of famous writers and she has been granted access to Bill's home to make his image (I explored that initial interaction in the Chapter One). The character of Karen, Scott's partner who also sleeps with Bill, seems to exist in the novel as a tangible representation of this public versus private binary, witnessed in her role in a mass cult wedding opens the novel. Certainly, emboldened by Brita's portrait-making, Bill agrees to aid in the assistance of negotiating the release of a Swiss poet by traveling to Europe to speak on his behalf. While there, Bill is involved in an accident, eventually dying from his injuries. Brita, in essence finishing his task, ends the novel by traveling to Beirut to photograph the terrorists responsible for the kidnapping of the Swiss hostage (though we never really learn the fate of the man).

As I began with in the first chapter, Brita and Bill's initial portrait session is plentiful with the opening moves of DeLillo's photo-ethical encounter. And the sort of master/servant relationship between Scott and Bill leaves Bill wondering, musing to Brita as she's come to, in a sense, free him from his brand of prison through the means of

photographic portraiture; at the beginning of her portrait session with Bill, DeLillo writes

how Brita

through the viewfinder...watched him smile. He looked clearer in the camera...so often in her work the human shambles was remade by the energy of her *seeing*, by the pure will that the camera uncovered in her, the will to see deeply. (37)

We know that Bill “couldn’t understand how any of it happened, how a young man...could find himself all these years later trapped in his own massive stillness” (45), but that something in the language of Brita’s photographic Saying (that is, her Seeing) has allowed Bill to begin a sort of denuding, an openness, an exposure. And he feels it as it is unfolding, as it is happening:

‘Do you realize what an intimate thing we’re doing?...We’re alone in a room involved in this mysterious exchange. What am I giving up to you? And what are you investing me with, or stealing from me? How are you changing me? I can feel the change like some current just under my skin.’ (43)

Bill’s queries surely represent an attempt to grasp at and understand the alteration (altercation?) that is underway via Brita’s portrait-capturing, and thus he also realizes how his encapsulation has granted him the realization that “I think I need these pictures more than you do” (44). Yet, Brita is succinct in her own assessment: “We make pictures together after all.” (45). The relations in the language could not be any more transparent: *we* are involved in an exchange, how are *you* substituting *me*? *We* are conjuring this figuration together.

Interestingly, though, Bill *feels* the shift, the change happening at the corporeal level: “just under the skin;” only later in the novel will this photoethical language transcend bodily interpretation, for later in the novel, during a moment when Scott is indeed interpreting Bill’s portrait as an outsider, DeLillo writes:

Scott thought the photograph might make him look older. Not older in the picture but older as himself, after the fact of the picture. The picture would be a means of transformation. It would show him how he looked

to the world and give him a fixed point from which to depart. Pictures with our likeness make us choose. We travel into or away from our photographs. (141)

This rigor works to confirm Brita and Bill's shared hunch on the transformative power of the photograph, as seen in that initial portrait session. In its declarative fixity initially concentrating on a bodily rudiment, the photograph then allows Bill to become hostage to the Other and therefore granted passage to move beyond essence.

But as for this denuding, this mingling enmeshment (or *enfleshment*) of bodies, one can readily find connections to Levinas's notations in *Otherwise than Being*, when he deliberates about being in one's skin, and worth quoting at length here; Levinas says:

The expression 'in one's skin' is not a metaphor for the in-itself; it refers to a recurrence in the dead time or the *meanwhile* which separates inspiration and expiration, the diastole and systole of the heart beating dully against the walls of one's skin. The body is not only an image or figure here; it is the distinctive in-oneself of the contraction of ipseity and its breakup. This contraction is not an impossibility to forget oneself, to detach oneself from oneself, in the concern for oneself. It is a recurrence to oneself out of an irrecusable exigency of the other, a duty overflowing my being, a duty becoming a debt and an extreme passivity prior to the tranquility, still quite relative, in the inertia and materiality of things at rest. It is a restlessness and patience that support prior to action and passion. Here what is due goes beyond having, but makes giving possible. This recurrence is incarnation. In it the body which makes giving possible makes one *other* without alienating. For this other is the heart, and the goodness, of the same, the inspiration or the very psyche in the soul. (109)

Aside from the exhilaratingly lyrical splendor of the prose, the progression of thought here flourishes outward. And thus is the process of Brita's image-making, the Saying/Seeing, and the material portrait that results, the Said/the traced Seen: the conveyance of how Bill's older-looking skin is a reminder of the Self, a Self giving way to a choice to move outside therein. Brita's portrait session is equated by Bill as preparing a body for death (in some discernible foreshadowing):

'You're preparing the body all right.'

Chemicals and paper, that's all it is.'

'Rouging my cheeks. Waxing my hands and lips. But when I'm really dead, they'll think of me as living in your picture.' (44)

Naturally the parallels to the Barthesian "future death" seen in Chapter Two are pretty clear, but what else is present in this passage is the recurrence, the perpetual return to incarnation, to the infinite life: in the picture Bill's body, his *face*, is never dead, because they made the photograph *together*.

Of course, Bill's complex imprisonment as a (self-)cloistered artist, is mirrored by the very literal instances of hostage-taking in the Beirut scenes existent in the latter half of the novel—the parallels to Powers here are intriguing—with the captured poet Jean-Claude. As Mark Osteen asserts, Part Two "opens instead with another man in a small room—the capture poet Jean-Claude—thus moving from a voluntary hostage (Gray) to an involuntary one" (654), thus cleaving the book in two with separate yet related hostage-related narratives (of note too is how Osteen makes a passing reference to the symbolism of the initials J.C.). After Bill's transcendental experience with Brita, he is given metaphysical agency to attempt to free Jean-Claude, and this circuit will attempt to close itself, after Bill's death, when Brita travels to Beirut to make a portrait of Abu Rashid, the terrorist leader who first spearheaded the imprisonment of Jean-Claude.

Jean-Claude may be an "involuntary" hostage as Osteen claims, but there certainly seems to be a semblance of familiarity, not of a resigning to his fate per se, but of an acknowledgment of his metaphysical *presentness*, an awareness, a being-in-the-world, much like Powers's Taimur. Certainly, Part Two of *Mao II* opens with Jean-Claude's imprisonment, but we feel we are already amongst this tenure, as readers we almost feel strangely tolerant of his capture, for even Jean-Claude himself seems to as well: "he conceded the fact of his confinement. He admitted to the presence of the plastic wire...he conceded the hood"(108). Furthermore, we also see that Jean-Claude desires

to seek closer proximity, for “with time and tools he would learn Arabic...greet them in their language” (108). He even begins to associate with his main caregiver (and torturer), a masked boy who we later associate as Rashid’s son: “he began to identify with the boy. As all his voices fled he thought he might be somewhere in the boy” (111). Jean-Claude, while still unsure, is certainly beginning to experience a sense of *substitution*, of replacing his Self with that of Other. Levinas says that “substitution for the neighbor is the source of all compassion. It is responsibility for the very outrage that the other...inflicts on me [and] persecutes me” (166). Paul Ricoeur, in his close reading of *Otherwise than Being*, reminds us that Levinas’s concept of substitution “is the heart of the book and, as it were, its origin” (90). Yes, we know that the boy beats at him, even tries to pull out his teeth with his bare hands, yet Jean-Claude “didn’t hate the boy” because the boy brought him “images that would trail them into middle age...those sad little picture-stories so dependable and true” (111).

Again, we know that a chief tenet of *Otherwise than Being* is that “I am responsible for the very faults of another, for his deeds and misdeeds. The condition of being hostage is an authentic figure of responsibility” (Lingis xx). Is this some sort of ethically articulated Stockholm Syndrome; has Jean-Claude found an ethical transcendence in his identification with his captors? Well, just as Jean-Claude values the boy, even yearns to engage in a substitutive-ethical arrangement, it is the power of pictures that augments his commitment:

They’d given him a second self, an immortality...he was a digital mosaic in the processing grid, lines of ghostly type on microfilm. They were putting him together...bouncing his image off of the moon. He saw himself floating to the far shores of space, past his own death and back again. But he sensed they’d forgotten his body by now. (112)

Just as Power’s Taimur feels he has split, has two heads, Jean-Claude, via the image, via the photograph, has sprouted a second Self, and is now too paradoxically both Self

and Other. As Critchley affirms, the “precondition for the ethical relation to the other is found in Levinas’s *picture* of the ethical subject...for it is here that ethics is worked out as theory of the subject, what he calls ‘the other within the same’” (62). For by their taking of his portrait to mass distribute across the media in order to make known their demands as a terrorist organization, the terrorist cell has also manufactured a situation for Jean-Claude to engender a sort of transcendence through the figural.

Transcendence *through* the figural? In the expressive turns of his language, DeLillo can only begin to articulate this process for Jean-Claude, DeLillo can only journey down the path of language to the clearing, and he does his best in this scene<sup>27</sup>. Jean-Claude *sees* his own death and birth again amidst the vast infinity of space, and he *senses* the non-existence of his body; DeLillo’s doing double-duty here: indeed, his captors appear to care less and less of Jean-Claude’s state now that they’ve produced his image, but why not just say “they’d forgotten him by now?” Why in his *body* implicated? And what does it mean to *sense*? Jean-Luc Nancy asserts, in *The Sense of the World* (a key work that Derrida will consider at length in his own response, *On Touching*):

we are already *in the world* in an unheard-of sense—that is, perhaps, in that unheard-of sense that eternally returns to make itself heard in sense, an unheard-of sense that precedes all senses, and that precedes us, warning and surprising us at once. (2)

Jean-Claude’s corporeal form has been permanently altered, his materiality via an ethical photographic encounter has allowed him to recognize the potentiality of a

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<sup>27</sup> With *The Body Artist*, DeLillo truly progresses on this matter. Not only as a stylist do his compositions grow more compact and sparser in length, but their language grows more robust, more ontologically poetic; or, as Heidegger asserts in *On the Way to Language*: “the being of language—the language of being;” we cannot ‘hear’ this, and certainly cannot ‘read’ it, but DeLillo’s onto-poetics, his interaction of thinking to poetic prose, while definitely at play here, do reach closer to the dwelling of the face-to-face encounter in the open clearing.

transcendental experience, he has indeed returned to this untranslatable 'senselessness' that comes both before and after being-in-the-world. In other words, Jean-Claude's transcorporeal mutability into a photographic image has allowed him to sense the senselessness, feel the unfeeling, or in the convention of Jacques Ranciere in *The Future of the Image*, "the unrepresentable," or that which is "the trace of the Other" found in Other-as-representational (133): through the image, Jean-Claude is both outside the world and *with-in* it.

Following these scenes with Jean-Claude, the narrative makes a leap in time and place to Bill, en route to aid in the release of Jean-Claude. In meeting with George, a representative for Rashid in Beirut, he tells Bill the stakes: "This is why the closed state was invented. And it begins with a single hostage, doesn't it? The hostage is the miniaturized form" (163). Even though on the surface George is speaking of the supplementation of globalized terror-politics as the new status quo, as a sort of New World Order nation-state, the larger insinuation here the idea of individualism pitted alongside an ethical individualism, the "motivating, empowering ethics of commitment and political resistance" (Critchley 39). As their conversation progresses, Bill says to George:

'Look. What happens if I go to Beirut and complete this spiritual union you find so interesting? Talk to Rashid. Can I expect him to release the hostage? And what will he want in return?

'He'll want you to take the other man's place.' (164)

A form of pure substitution, no? Of course Bill never physically makes the trip, as when stepping outside he is struck by a car and dies later of a lacerated liver (years of heavy drinking retard his healing, we learn). Before heading out into the air, Bill turns to George, asking a final question:

'And what happens if I get on a plane right now and go home?'

'They kill the hostage.'

'And photograph *his* corpse.'

'It's better than nothing,' George said. (164)

As Bill is hospitalized abroad, he begins to write about the hostage, for he indirectly knows this will begin "collecting aura and force" (224), yet in these writings Bill initiates his ethical substitution, he begins to exchange himself for Jean-Claude, knowing that Brita's portraits, at this point not yet released, will come out: "the pictures would appear...word would build and spread...the nice things about life is that it's filled with second chances" (224). We never fully learn Jean-Claude's fate, but in a way his time on a material plane is subordinate to the infinitude rendered by Bill's portraits, which have become interpellated with his own image. And in relation to death of Bill: in the absolute final paragraph of *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas reminds us that "the destitution and the desituating of the subject do not remain without signification" (185). So much of our world is ultimately a material one: we are beings of language and must communicate as such. Indeed, there is still signification in some regard, when death finds an authentic, transcendent Dasein, there is still a trace of the Seen to be found in the Seeing world; the trace of an inarticulatable language (a touch, a caress, a picture) felt and seen simultaneously by the substitution of the hostage. Our responsibility to the face of the other holds us in that captivity.

The novel closes with Brita in Beirut, on assignment now for a German newspaper to capture Rashid's picture, and the scene offers a bookended circularity to the portraiture session with Bill that opened the novel ("I feel as if I'm being taken to see some terrorist chief at his secret retreat in the mountains" Brita had remarked to Scott pulling into Bill's driveway for the first time); there is a sense of closure in the discourse for Rashid, and his order of terrorism has replaced the writer as the New creator of



narratives. Yet an order that still relies, puzzlingly perhaps, on responsibility, substitution, and the photograph. At last, Brita makes it to her subject in Beirut:

Brita raises the camera...she has Rashid in the viewfinder.

'I saw the boys outside with your picture on their shirts. Why is this? What does this accomplish?

Rashid drinks and wipes his mouth. But it is the interpreter who speaks.

'What does this accomplish? It gives them a vision they will accept and obey. These children need an identity outside the narrow function of who they are and where they come from. Something completely outside the helpless forgotten lives of their parents and grandparents.'

She takes Rashid's picture' (232-233).

The whole section is built this way, the dialogue filtered through a nameless interlocutor known simply as 'the interpreter;' we never actually see Rashid's dialogue from Rashid, we never actually know what is lost here in the strata of DeLillo's narratological game.

And later, again via the interpreter:

'We teach them identity, sense of purpose...The image of Rashid in their identity...the boys who work near Abu Rashid have no face or speech. Their features are identical. They are his features. They don't need their own features or voices. They are surrendering these things to something powerful and great.' (233-234)

Are we to take this at face value, are readers to understand that these boys, brandishing portraits of Rashid on their chests, are becoming hostage to Rashid, that they are withholding their Self's identity to the Same, encountering the alterity of their master and Other? After all, Levinas reminds us in *Otherwise than Being* that

for under accusation by everyone, the responsibility for everyone goes to the point of substitution. A subject is a hostage. Obsessed with responsibilities which did not arise in decisions taken by a subject "contemplating freely," consequently accused in its innocence, subjectivity in itself is being thrown back on oneself. (112)

These boys, surrendering their free thought, are they not just hostages too? It seems clear that DeLillo wants these questions to come to light, for Brita asks immediately about

Jean-Claude's fate from the year previous: "What about the hostage?' she says" (235). Rashid—again, *through* the translator—tells her that the Westerner "is a threat to self-respect, to identity" (235). While asking Rashid's pictures during all this dialogue, the thought crosses her mind, with one shot remaining on her roll of film, to find out for herself who these boys are beneath their hoods; she steps to Rashid's son, removes his hood, steps back and fires her last exposure:

He is very dark, wearing the picture of his father safety-pinned to his shirt, and his eyes are slightly murderous, this is the only word, but also calm and completely aware. He knows her. Abu Rashid says something...then the boy picks up his hood and leaves the room...feeling detached, almost out-of-body, she walks over to Rashid and shakes his hand. (237)

And thus ends Brita's portraiture session with Rashid. "There is a curious knot that binds novelists and terrorists" (41), Bill had told Brita during their session. Aside from the sharing of narratives, from the exchange of one form of grand narrative for another, what also binds novelists and terrorists, Bill to Rashid (and Rashid's son), is the notion of the face's mystery, despite its *unmasking*. Musing to Scott of her work's goals, Brita asks: "people still want the image, don't they? It's a clue to the mystery inside. Or is the mystery in the face?" (26). And, thus, in the dehooding of Rashid's boy (which the elder Rashid's calm reaction denotes a mutual understanding), we reach closer to an ethical disclosure. If we recall Irigaray's concept of "visual touching" from *The Way of Love* mentioned in Chapter One and later in Five, we can also hopefully, simultaneously recall that an important component in

preparing for an encounter cannot be reduced to covering the other with clothes, images, or speeches which render this other familiar to us...attraction is often awakened by the different between two worlds, by the mystery that one represents for the other. (151)

So, just because Brita sees the younger Rashid's face, and takes a picture of it, *of him*, there is still a sensation of mystery to it all, of an out-of-body-ness. Yet, portraiture—

photographically or mentally conjured apparatuslessly—is still a form of ethical *touching*, and thus indeed “a light often visible through its effects rather than in itself (Irigaray 174), for portraiture-making as a touching experience dictates that the “light” is in the active process (the Seeing), not the passive product or image (the Seen). And hence, Brita’s “out-of-body” experience and her ability to see it as well when she hits the streets of Beirut, where the people on it, on the penultimate page, “they all look transcendent” (240) because: they are *light*; they *are* light.

## Chapter 4

### Ethical Situationality, Love, and the Labyrinthine Photo-Event of Truth

“While enthusiasts and detractors will continue to empty entire dictionaries attempting to describe or deride it, ‘authenticity’ still remains the word most likely to stir a debate. In fact, this leading obsession—to validate or invalidate the reels and tapes—invariably brings up a collateral and more general concern: whether or not, with the advent of digital technology, image has forsaken its once unimpeachable hold on truth.”

-Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (first paragraph of first chapter)

“A truth is solely constituted by rupturing with the order which supports it, never as an effect of that order. I have named this type of rupture, which opens up truths, ‘the event.’ Authentic philosophy begins not in structural facts...but uniquely in what takes place and what remains in the form of a strictly incalculable emergence.”

-Alain Badiou, preface to *Being and Event*

“Our first tentative definition of event as an effect which exceeds its causes thus brings us back to an inconsistent multiplicity: is an event a change in the way reality appears to us, or is it a shattering transformation of reality itself?”

-Slavoj Žižek, *Event: A Philosophical Journey Through a Concept*

### The Eruptive Ethics of Danielewski's Mediations

In the previous chapters, I engaged with the theories of ethical facing between multiple postmodern American phototexts; this chapter will examine Mark Z. Danielewski's postmodern tome (tomb?) *House of Leaves*, an extremely intricate work that, in its visual and textual complexity, will best serve an analysis as the singular literary text for focus. And just as we saw with the respective fiction in the previous chapters, the complicated structure of Danielewski's novel also lends itself to a demonstration of simply being *built* ethically, exhibited by its multiplicities of synchronously running narrative voices (delineated by footnotes and font changes), its treatments of varied time and

space within these said narrative expressions, as well as the concurrence of both text and image (each both mono- and poly-colored, no less). Moreover, the constant presence of photographic devices, at every textual level, and how Danielewski implements these devices for ethical ‘ends,’ will also be a chief focus of this present chapter.

Alongside *House of Leaves*, we will return, together, to the work of Alain Badiou, not seen since Chapter One, and how his unique tracts on ethics—theories that inextricably involve the notions of the *event* and something he terms, *situationality*—as well as other imperative concepts, principally how subjects respond with *fidelity* to such events, either via related ‘gateways’ of truth, or not. Additionally, both *House of Leaves* and Badiou’s ethical modelings that I will examine, appear around the dawn of the new millennium, but I plan to illustrate in the current chapter, in a progressive combination with the subsequently concluding one, how the cleaving of the 9/11 event, and the tumultuous years that followed, did *not* negate the call to ethics and for the ethical. Furthermore, I hope to reassert that all of the thus far ethically examined ethical paradigms ultimately ‘manufacture’ a sort of pluralized<sup>28</sup> model indeed, and one that is still relevant and readily applicable.

However, for my more focused ambition regarding this present chapter, I will argue how Badiou’s stance of and on ethics, when pluralized—or “sutured,” to borrow another one of Badiou’s oft commissioned terms—along with the previous ethical

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<sup>28</sup> Simon Critchley, in an interview with Seferin James from 2009, speaks also of a “mutualism,” of being a “mutualist” (8), a related concept to his own analogism of “dividualism,” as we saw much earlier, an idea coming from one of his books on ethics, *Infinitely Demanding*. Pluralism, mutualism, dividualism: these are all interrelated terminologies for the same metaphysical, ethical concept describing a community of discourse brought together by multiply significant sources of meticulous thought. In other words, the languages of these nomenclatures are ethical. Furthermore, Critchley—as a contemporaneous, and frequent, interlocutor with Badiou and his writing—can still aid in an encounter with the *perceived* remoteness Badiou’s mathematically based philosophy.

examples I have examined, not only work quite satisfactorily inside a seemingly sporadic phototext like *House of Leaves*, but I shall also demonstrate how such a multi-originary ethical framework works well in the arguably vacuous, obscure, and hectic postmodern American milieu existent right up to the eve of 9/11—and beyond, still. But is not Badiou's ethical stance often presupposed as that of an eccentric, of a pessimistic naysayer? As Christopher Norris has claimed elsewhere, "Badiou is generally thought of as an anti-ethical thinker...[but] it had better be said that Badiou is an anti-ethical thinker on just about every definition or conception of 'ethics' that has played a significant role in modern debate" (1103). In other words, Badiou *could* be regarded as anti-ethical *if* one were to consider only the earlier exemplars of Levinas, Derrida, and Critchley as the sole contributors to, and crafters of, the canon of ethics. But such an arrangement would be erroneous because if we put it even another way: Badiou's ethics reframes the conception of the field, so much so that his ethical thought is mistakenly cast as something else, something non-ethical. After all, Badiou *does* level some bold assertions to the ilk of: "I do not hesitate to say that 'ethical' ideology is, in our Western societies, the principal (albeit transitory) adversary of all those striving to hold fast to some true thought" (90); or, "all ethical predication based on recognition of the other should be purely and simply abandoned" (qtd. in Hallward xv). And even though such statements are not even taken out of context here, such proclamations do work yet collectively in their revelatory clout: the truth—acting with fidelity to an event (either an individual or shared event) always supersedes, but does not negate, an other-concern. As Badiou's recurrent translator-interlocutor Peter Hallward (Badiou dubs him in one essay "a demanding friend") affirms: Badiou's "ethical prescription can be summarized by the single imperative: 'Keep Going!' or 'Continue!' For truth is difficult by definition. It implies an effectively *selfless* devotion to a cause" (xi, emphasis in original). And Badiou himself

in his conclusion to *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* uses some identical language towards the end: "I then went on to sketch an acceptable concept of ethics, whose maxim is subordinate to the development of truths. This maxim proclaims, in its general version, 'Keep Going!'" (90-91). A perseverance and resolute rigor for the truth, for truth demands 'militancy' (a word Badiou is fond of employing in such a circumstance), it demands an insistency that can *only* be carried out with *some-thing* understood, commonly, as ethical.

*Keep going*: such a simple, dual worded phrase works so well with *House of Leaves*, as I hope to illustrate, for the not only does the text *look* difficult by the features of its labyrinthine structures, thus calling for the reader to always soldier forth, but the words themselves *speak* to struggle, of difficulty, of characters who want and need to be tenacious and persistent before a truth-disclosure: the central character Navidson returns to the bowels of the house five times; commentator Johnny Truant takes himself to both a physical and mental brink in both learning about his past and negotiating his present. But how is one able to join the words of Badiou on truth and fidelity to the purposefully 'untrue' fiction of *House of Leaves*? Is not Danielewski's text, at every turn, fraught with footnotes to false and outright non-existent sources, unreliable narrators, and baffling tiers of nested mediations designed to confuse and contort an upright readerly orientation; do not these dazzling means maneuver directly *against* the kernels of truth? It would seem. And the long answer to these queries will of course reveal themselves amidst the unfurling of the present chapter itself, but the short answer is thus: the truth here *may be* that there is the ever-specious possibility of no truth, of a non-truth. And this is not meant to sound so dire and bleak: Danielewski's many-stepped novel is, I think, a way of responding *against* the 'customary' postmodern way of answering, as David Harvey identifies towards his conclusion of *The Condition of Postmodernity*: "the first line

of defence is to withdraw into a kind of shell-shocked, blasé, or exhausted silence and to bow down before the overwhelming sense of how vast, intractable, and outside any individual or even collective control everything is” (350); Danielewski’s novel does labor in the service of Harvey’s modus for best jettisoning such a ‘typical’ postmodern response and it is far from an ‘exhausted silence:’ “excessive information...is one of the best inducements to forgetting” (350). Certainly, a kind of blind maximalism is undesirable, but what *is* suitable is the working-towards, with dedicated and rigorous textual fidelity, of a truth—via photographic procedures *with-in* the text—a truth that forgets such ‘blasé’ reactions, such *inauthenticity*. As Juliet Flower MacCannell so succinctly reminds us in an essay on Badiou and love: “Authentic Truth, for him, is always a “truth in progress” (139), a progressive momentum always-already moving nearer and nearer to truth. To Keep Going!, that is *how* one can traverse down the path to the clearing in such disquieting times.

Indeed, the phototextual words and images coexist *par excellence* for how to relay a truthful fidelity to the shattering event. And it is this meta-ethical—yes, even in a Badiouian demarcation of the ethical understanding—that *appears* via photographic ‘means.’ It is the stratified photographic qualities of the novel that engender and, to use Hallward qua Badiou’s ingenious idiom, ‘en-*courage*’ an ‘ethics of truth.’ This, as such, can hopefully offer something of an innovative discernment *in-to* a reading of the already frequently studied *House of Leaves*: interlacing Badiou’s very unique thinking on ethics with the pointed interpenetrations of Danielewski’s very unique thinking on (phototextual) fiction.



### A Recapitulation of Badiou's Evental Truth(s)

Yet, before fully delving into the varied particulars of *House of Leaves* and the ethical bent of its phototextual dynamics therein, a thorough review (for both reader *and* writer) of Badiou's larger thought remains absolutely mandatory. As Badiou is ever so adamant about elucidating lines of thought as they pertain to the concrete and the material—as well as owning up to a serious obligation for the methodical applications of all philosophy (not just his) in the 'real world'—then perhaps it is suitable to *approach* a disclosure of such 'said' thought in a correspondingly palpable and straightforward routine. By now expounding on many of his central terms and concepts as they relate to my own project, by way of some concise recapitulations one by one, not only does this veritably honor some of his exact concerns, but it also services an inquiry towards an ethics that actively departs—yet nevertheless remains linked—from those examined thus far in my study.

Fabien Tarby, in *Philosophy and the Event*, his book of interviews with Badiou, ends with a curiously titled chapter: "Short Introduction to Alain Badiou's Philosophy" (curious, obviously, because its overarching, preliminary glosses come *following* an entire book length of complex thought by Badiou). But it is with these ending thoughts that may act as the most appropriate place to initiate my cursory review, restatement, and reimagining of Badiou's exceptional paradigm of (mathematical) ontology, and his subsequent ethical paradigm, rooted in truth and a fidelity to the situation of the event. For Badiou does not recognize the opposition *between* ontology and ethics (for such a besetting is *unethical*, no?), per Critchley qua Levinas, and he instead associates the relationship as answering "under the commitment to an event [which] is of an ontological nature in one sense: because it is something, an event, which is a rupture in the order of

being. And so the ethics of the situation, the ethics of truth” goes far beyond an individualized experience (the place where ethics *originates* for Badiou, despite its later alterity) for events’ irruptions are always of a wider, communal (and political) nature (Badiou 161). This idea of truth, more on which will I discuss momentarily, is for Badiou “a construction of a new multiplicity in a concrete world” (158); thus these truth-events, handled ethically as truth-processes *with-in* the experiential event, forge new ontological pathways, mutiplicitious and infinite.

Especially with his great masterwork *Being and Event*, but elsewhere too, Badiou is concerned with stating and restating this general thesis of the multiple, and according to Tarby’s paraphrasing, for Badiou:

being is simply the infinity of multiplicities. It is not a being. To speak of being in the singular, as language irresistible invites us to do, mustn’t make us fantasize about some sort of unity of being: there are only multiplicities that are infinitely decomposable into new multiplicities...in short, infinity and multiplicities are the legitimate basis of everything there is. As a result, mathematics is alone capable of pronouncing on being. (136-37)

Indeed, Tarby is obviously reinforcing the significance of mathematical ontology—in essence, dubbed ‘the matheme’ by Badiou<sup>29</sup>—to positively schematize these ontological

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<sup>29</sup> In his “Introduction” to *Being and Event*, Badiou is practically at pains to make the following concept as crystalized as possible: mathematics *is* ontology, but not that *being* is mathematical. Mathematics (rather than the, say, Parmenidesian poetics of the later Heidegger) guarantee(s) truth, thus mathematics reinforces the following: “our goal is to establish the meta-ontological thesis that mathematics is the historicity of the discourse on being qua being” (13). But, again, Badiou is quite clear to assert that “my discourse is never epistemological, nor is it a philosophy of mathematics...mathematics is *cited* here to let its ontological essence become manifest” (18). Finally, Badiou ends this Introduction by accurately claiming that:

mathematics has a particular power to both fascinate and horrify which I hold to be a social construction: there is no reason for it. Nothing is presupposed here apart from attention...nothing else is required other than an elementary familiarity with formal language. (19)

So, even though he does employ the symbol-rich representations of logic and math, in the end, Badiou’s matheme operates merely to thematize his ontological and ethical thought (much like the earlier metaphysicists of this study relied on language), for as we

conceptions. However, in his language, one can also readily see how Tarby is certainly *referring* to the ethical: this infinite and these endless multiples *speak* of something that moves beyond merely the One, that is the Void (which Badiou marks in *Being and Event* with:  $\emptyset$ ). While Levinas's metaphysics may assign theological—or even sanctimoniously pious, to some—'values' to this call of the ethically infinite, Badiou correctly confirms this many times over in *Ethics*, with such exemplified statements: "Levinas's enterprise serves to remind us, with extraordinary insistence, that every effort to turn ethics into the principle of thought and action is essentially religious" (23); and Tarby's language cannot avoid the vastness of non-singularity, per an ontology born on mathematical grounds. Flower MacCannell confirms this multiplicity as well, asserting how Badiou outright "rejects Levinas (and all liberal-ethics') espousal of the notion of an 'infinite alterity' in humanity, on the grounds that even alterity is too singularized, a ruse of the One" (160). In other words, no one can deny Levinas's theological foundations (though these appear less frequently by *Otherwise than Being*, or are at least expressed less divisively, I would argue) alongside the possibility of his alterity as even a maneuver of non-multiplicity; *and* one can eagerly see how Badiou's ontology *is* ethical.<sup>30</sup> So, then, how do Badiou's thoughts congeal into such ethical systems?

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will see it is Badiou's four *generic procedures*, or *truth procedures* of love, art, science, and politics that work towards the disclosure of understanding the truth of an eruptive event. Relatedly, Slavoj Žižek's 2014 work, *Event: A Philosophical Journey Through a Concept* takes, if I may, a vintage Žižek-as-contrarian approach to these four classifications (though here he feels pretty right on here) of "events into species and sub-species...however such an approach ignores the basic feature of an event: the surprising emergence of something new which undermines every stable scheme" (7). In summation, Žižek sets up a very deconstructive, and therefore very *ethical*, examination to Badiou's truth-event paradigm: "the only appropriate solution is thus to approach events in an eventual way—to pass from one to another notion of event by way of bringing out the pervading deadlocks of each, so that our journey is one through the transformations of universality itself" (7).

<sup>30</sup> With the conclusion to her book, *The Signifying Body*, Penelope Ingram maintains that

First, Badiou posits the idea of the *event* and its interrelated 'part,' the *situation*. These basic categories of his thought, and their distinctions, inform part of the vital core in his philosophy. Again, Tarby asserts most broadly that "there is an acute awareness that, with human beings, *something happens*, for them and by them. This something exceeds the structures, at least at the point of its existence. This is what the *event* is," while Badiou likes to define the *situation* as not exactly "an element or a set of elements in the structure that is present" (142). Christopher Norris clearly, if not longwindedly, understands the event/situation linkage as so:

an event in this authentic or qualitative sense is what typically occurs when some existing situation is suddenly brought to crisis-point by the coming-to-light of a hitherto suppressed anomaly, injustice, conflict of interests or case of exclusion from the tally of those who properly, legitimately count according to prevalent notions of inclusivity. (1109)

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Ontology is ethics, or more precisely that Being is disclosed in the ethical encounter with the Other, should be understood in light of the various claims each makes. Both ethics and ontology are...dependent on the development of a new language, one that escapes the grounding of representation...if ethics is the condition for saying, and saying is the condition for Being, and both require a relation to the proximate and the corporeal, then material signification is precisely the kind of saying that discloses Being in the lighting of the ethical encounter with the Other. (120)

Likewise, Emma R. Jones in an article from a 2012 issue of *L'Esprit Createur* devoted entirely to Luce Irigaray (more on the beautiful similarity in thought between Irigaray and Badiou here momentarily), states that "the ontological occurrence of the human being as sexuate, speaking subject already contains within it the possibility of and the call toward the ethical project of coexistence in difference" (28). While Ingram and Jones's arguments both explore a "physicalized" language of the touch, the body, and the shared enfleshments between sexually differentiated entities in specific literary texts—indeed a language that transcends the figural (Ingram 120)—these thoughts help substantiate, perhaps, my present study that builds out laterally from this to place phototextual *seeing* as a looking *through* this same categorical 'lens' onto difference and proximity. Furthermore, like Ingram and Jones's contentions that seek to minimize any sort of embattlement *between* ethics and ontology, Badiou's avowal on the role of truth in building a *fidelity* to the event, opens many a fresh foci that neither *fully* relinquish Levinasian/Critchleyian Other-centric responsibility *nor* embrace a wholly individualized subjective experience. The reciprocal, symbiotic relationship *between* ontology and ethics is just 'refocused' on the situation of an event that allows for entities to even experience the chance for the ethical engagement in the first place.

Moreover, according to contemporary philosopher Ernesto Laclau, Badiou says the “situation is the terrain of a multiplicity corresponding to what can be called, in general terms, the field of objectivity” while the event, on the other hand, “is grounded on that which is radically unrepresentable within the situation, that which constitutes its *void*” (121). What do all of these descriptions mean, exactly, when taken together? The event is *something* that happens: something big, something major, something intangible across the face of tangibility of the situation. Does this mean that the onto-ethical ‘inducing’ event and the seeable material situation are merely two sides of the same coin? Not precisely, for they are both not mutually exclusive. Benjamin Noys reminds us that

there must be ‘something extra’ that supplements the situation, what Badiou calls an event. The event cannot be named in the terms of the situation, and so cannot be the object of opinion or the exchange of communications, but rather it ‘compels us to decide a *new way of being*.’ (33)<sup>31</sup>

Accordingly, the situationality of the event goes *beyond* its structures, disrupts it outright and opens the discourse for a version of transcendence, though Badiou deliberately evades such a word due to its far-too-otherworldly and possible theosophical connotations—transcendence is *something* not of the material world<sup>32</sup>. And while entities

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<sup>31</sup> The quoted portion in Noys’s final clause here come from Badiou’s *Ethics* book, page 41. Again, this illustrates Badiou’s ontologically-centered ethical pattern: the way in which *we* decide to reconcile with the direction the situationality of the event takes us is what could be called ethics, or again in Badiou’s apt phraseology: “an ethic of truths”—rather than something coming *a priori* to ontology per Levinas et al., Badiou’s paradigm involves a co-originary of ethics and ontology (but then one could question: in such co-originaryity, is not one right to find *ethics*?). Noys uses this metaphoric language of co-existence in terms of talking about *fidelity*, another important concept of Badiou’s ethics that I will discuss here in a moment.

<sup>32</sup> *Being and Event* has a sequel in *Logics of Worlds* (yes, the noted subtitle is *Being and Event II*). But this latter work, which is equally as arduous as its predecessor, the idea of ‘transcendence’ is more thoroughly and deeply explored, all through Badiou’s same mathematical rigor. Badiou explicitly states in many places throughout *Logics of Worlds* that such an extrapolation came about from the confusion and criticism of his contemporary thinkers—such a maturation between the two books echoes, it seems, the

can certainly choose to avoid, or utterly deny the event, in doing so, these same individuals will therefore prevent acknowledging the disruption, and this in turn will greatly cloud the pathway to truth, and the doorway to disclosure will remain gapingly ajar. Then, how does this all 'turn' into an ethics for Badiou? As he says himself in *Ethics*: "there is no ethics in general. There are only—eventually—ethics of processes by which we treat the possibilities of a situation" (16). And how does one engage in this form of ethics? Through what Badiou calls a *fidelity*, as we've just begun to see, a fidelity to the situationality of the event, and this fidelity stands as a justly significant concept, and one that helps shape the broad foundation of Badiou's entire ethical archetype.

Oliver Feltham, in his translator's introduction to *Being and Event* defines fidelity outright, portraying it as that "which is drawn from the domain of love to designate all generic procedures in which a subject commits him or herself to working out the consequences of the occurrence of an event in a situation for the transformation of that situation" (xxxii). Gabriel Riera is a bit more succinct (and also eschews linking it to one of Badiou's generic sets, or truth-procedures): "fidelity is *the* central feature of Badiou's ethics" (94). Fidelity is so crucial in that it requires the subject to think about their material situation, singularly, before engaging in an inquiry on the multiplicity of their surrounding world; this demonstrates Badiou's ontology not as emerging *from* ethics, but that the two certainly co-habitate amongst a *quantifiable* (mathematical) reality in need of an addressing via truth. And more so, I would say that it is the fidelity to the event that *links* it to the clambering void of the situation; how one 'deals,' situationally, with the event

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transference Levinas displayed from *Totality and Infinity* to *Otherwise than Being*. Aside from the brevity of a cursory mention here and there, my own study will use very little of Badiou's sequel for its unwieldiness could further complicate its already somewhat unwieldy precursor, seen in *Being and Event*; furthermore, the areas where Badiou has predominately refocused and refined his thought—through neo-classical formulae of logic—have a lesser bearing on my own project.

rendered amongst the community of Others, as Feltham directs us, via the realm of love<sup>33</sup>: this, for Badiou, *is* ethics. Indeed, I tend agree with Zizek in his most recent work, *Event*, where he interrogates the classification of events into these four categories right in his opening move, however I also think Badiou's attempts to thematize the event are not without some self-doubt as well, a hesitance that the contemporaneous philosopher Norris picks up on in his own tremendously comprehensive analysis of *Being and Event*:

after all, there is a clear conflict of aims between any project, like Badiou's, which stakes its claim on the subject's fidelity to the task of testing or bearing out certain scientific truth-claims, mathematical

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<sup>33</sup> Love is, of course, for Badiou one of the four major philosophical truth-procedures (alongside: science, art, and politics, as we saw earlier) and he has devoted much ink to this one philosophical truth-process in particular, as Feltham alludes in his own understanding of Badiou's fidelity. And as we saw somewhat in the opening chapter, and will see in a far more detailed fashion with the subsequent one, two of Luce Irigaray's books, *The Way of Love* and *Sharing the World*, approach love *and* eventual fidelity in a very similar manner, with the caressing, loving touch serving as a pristine mode of/for an eruptive ethical encountering. And while Lisa Watrous is correct in her assertion that "Luce Irigaray and Alain Badiou, when thought together, *provide a lens through which the truthful event of love might be conceived*" (66, emphasis mine), those two above-mentioned works by Irigaray will find a more rigorous unfolding in the succeeding chapter, not only to keep the present chapter more tightly concentrated on a single theorist, but also because her optimal approach to a material, bodily proximity might act nicely as something more of a bookend, which is to say something more reiterating and finalizing. Yet, in addition to this, Peter Hallward's introduction to Badiou's book *Ethics* mentions Irigaray (as well as Spivak) as a robust "voice in the varied but harmonious ethical chorus [who] contributes to this scheme in a more 'embodied' quality, a more 'substantially' othered understanding of otherness" (xxvii). And while I would say that Hallward certainly has a strong and biased reverence for those practicing the 'Badiou brand' of ethical understanding, his two scare quoted words here—'embodied,' 'substantially'—play more, I believe, on the active 'pun' denoting the material and tangible *re-presentations* of Badiou's reifying thought, something in which love greatly aids with because *we feel it*, possibly more so than the other three procedures. Or, as Tarby states it in his introduction to Badiou's thought: "truth is, then, concrete: it is not a simple mental representation; it is what we make of our love...love is much more a matter of acts that it is of representations" (145). Basically, the parallels, connections, and cross-overs between Badiou and Irigaray's musings on love and the truth-event cannot and should not be ignored; so, this footnoted acknowledgement is merely pleading for a sense of readerly patience until her respective theoreticism—and, most importantly to the present project, *how* her thought becomes enhanced and extended *through* phototextual encountering—garners a chapter all in itself.

thermos, artistic practices, or political commitments and a conception [of erotic/romantic love]. (28)<sup>34</sup>

And Badiou is *aware* of this said conflict: he states himself in that very work that “the mystery of these procedures has generally been referred either to their representable conditions...or to the transcendent beyond of their One” (17), and he questions the concept of a true politics (rather, he at least determines such a thing extremely “rare”), or if love *even exists at all*. In short, it might be beneficial to inject a bit of positivity into these critical comprehensions of Badiou’s thought: like Critchley, and like Derrida and Levinas before him, and even Heidegger before them all, Badiou uses the logic of these generic classification procedures like this aforementioned group of other thinkers affected the ethics of language (and: the language of ethics) to engage in a meta-discussion of ethics. Badiou uses the seemingly vast measures of those four categorizations merely to thematize a train of thought that might otherwise remain unthematizable; for, as he proclaims in the preface to *Logics of Worlds*, “*there are only bodies and languages*” (1) and then a bit later, the variant of this materialism: “*there are only individuals and communities*” (8, emphasis in original). These are solid and irrefutable truths, and in order to reroute through the truth(s) of language, you need language itself, a language *speaking* of self-subjectivity and of others.

Now, while it does appear as if there were a kind of progression here, a kind of systematic order of operations in some fashion, I don’t think this is altogether undesirable, for does not such a methodology just reinforce the mathematical logic inherent in such truth disclosure per Badiou? Let us look once again then, for the moment, with but a singular item from his list of four truth procedures: love. Not only

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<sup>34</sup> See Christopher Norris’s “Overview of Themes” section in his close reading, *Badiou’s Being and Event*, from Continuum (2009), pages 14-36.



does this truth procedure operate most directly with photographic ethics of *House of Leaves*, as we will see, but this truth procedure also *feels* more significant to Badiou than the other three. As Feltham precisely insinuated above, the fidelity of how one encounters, and hopes to even alter, an eventual *appearing* is borne from the realm of love, the truth procedure which seems to overreach the others. Moreover, this is a trend that Zizek picks up on too; in the essay “From Purification to Subtraction: Badiou and the Real,” Zizek emphasizes on some incisive questions, worthy of quoting here at some length:

so what about the fourth procedure, love? Is it not clear that it sticks out from the series, being somehow more fundamental and ‘universal,’ always liable to break out of line? There are thus not simply four truth procedures but three-plus-one—a fact perhaps not emphasized enough by Badiou himself...so is love not Badiou’s...category into which he throws all truth procedures which do not fit the other three modes? This fourth procedure also serves as a kind of underlying formal principle or matrix of all of them. (170)

Badiou, conceivably in addressing Zizek’s above call for an emphasis, opens his concise book *In Praise of Love* with a favorite quote from Plato: “anyone who doesn’t take love as a starting point will never understand the nature of philosophy” (3). Such classical words, when again combined with Zizek’s considerations above, do grant a sort of respite, a pause for thought: is love a sort of ur-text, then, could it be cogitated as *the* ‘supreme’ truth procedure? In the essay “What is Love?” Badiou himself posits that love “is an experience of the world, or of the situation, under the post-evental condition that there were Two...it is a *production of truth*. The truth of what? That the Two, and not only the One, are at work in the situation” (39). Love *makes* truth *and* decodes itself after its eruptive ‘passage:’ it is both in-the-world *and* beyond it, more so than the singularities of politics, art, and science. Love *is* the devotional ethical exchange. For such discussions of an “ethics of truth,” undoubtedly heralded *by* love, we can thus create *the* ideal transitional entrance into uniting Badiou’s ethics to the phototextual fiction of

Danielewski's *House of Leaves*. Indeed, in several interviews, Danielewski himself has described his novel *not* as a horror story, as many reviewers are wont to do, but as a love story<sup>35</sup> (according to my count, the word appears sixty-four times in the book's curious index). But what else can Badiou's ethics *tell* us about love, or rather, what else can his truth procedure *of* love *show* us about ethics, about the event, and about validating a vigorous fidelity to the said event?

Released in 2012, Badiou's English translation of his compact though headily potent book, *In Praise of Love*, dedicated itself to an even more prosaic approach of the subject. The book, structured as a set of answers to questions posed by interviewer Nicholas Truong<sup>36</sup>, examines more this major truth procedure, clarifying and simplifying

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<sup>35</sup> Though, this trend too is where more current criticism seems to place the novel: in the arena of love. See: Kasey Carpenter's "Post-Mortem: *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski" (<http://litreactor.com/columns/post-mortem-house-of-leaves-by-mark-z-danielewski>). Yet, even if approaching *House of Leaves* as something associative to love is not so much an against-the-grain reading anymore, then why not look to Danielewski's second novel, *Only Revolutions*, a novel with characters Danielewski himself has openly described as "madly in love with each other?" Additionally, Hanjo Berressem concludes his mathematical reading of *Only Revolutions* with a truly Badiouian understanding, although never citing the critic outright:

Danielewski dramatizes, in literature, the philosophical concept and definition of love by way of the scientific axioms of geometry and topology. He indeed 'does' philosophy and science in literature...the geometry of love, the parallax of love, the definition of love, the impossible meeting of two people—the moment when drifting towards becomes drifting away, when drifting towards is always already drifting away. (218)

These are all indeed the makings of a powerful tale rooted in basic love, and Badiouian, as I mentioned, in that Berressem references, as if verbatim, nearly all the philosopher's remaining other truth-procedures (science, art/literature), items given being here *through* mathematical constructions in text, as Berressem astutely claims. While this is certainly an accurate and genial understanding of *Only Revolutions*, the key mechanism absent here is the eventual rupture of the photographic components. Only *House of Leaves* encounters the ethical-becoming of love *because* of the eventual shift of the phototext(s) itself contained with-in; or: photography in *House of Leaves is the situation*.

<sup>36</sup> I find this format most genial to actively and clearly displaying a (meta)ethical 'process.' One may readily recall here Heidegger's "A Dialogue on Language Between a Japanese and an Inquirer," the opening piece in *On The Way to Language*; again, not only do such

previous complications in the process, thereby finally offering responses, either directly (as he does to Levinas) and indirectly, as to those engaging in something akin to Zizek's finger-pointings above which calls Badiou out for not acknowledging love's usurping clout amongst his own truth procedure matrices<sup>37</sup>. But how does love as a substantive, materially emotive exemplification of eventual fidelity guide its way into Badiou's ontological ethics? Firstly, it is through such love that Badiou is able to further solidify, and make brighter, his definition of the event: "love always starts with an encounter. And I would give this encounter the quasi-metaphysical status of an *event*, namely of something that doesn't enter into the immediate order of things" (28). Aside from his association and (near) identification of love as something metaphysical—a type of loftiness he often avoids—Badiou continues, and asserts that:

we shouldn't underestimate the power love possesses to slice diagonally through the most powerful oppositions and radical separations. The encounter between two differences is an event, is contingent and disconcerting, "love's surprises," theatre yet again. On the basis of this event, love can start and flourish. It is the first, absolutely essential point.  
(29)

This eminent *essentiality* reinforces, first, the notion that love *can* act as the superlative truth procedure. Secondly, love becomes a supplanting and reorienting event; it is

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presentations work towards explicating items of a deeply ontological and/or ethical nature, but the conversations themselves demonstrate such words by action, as it were.

<sup>37</sup> In regards to Levinas, Badiou takes umbrage, as he has elsewhere, with the "theological ruminations inspired by love, even though I know they have made a great impact on history" (24). Badiou worries about the connection of love to the ethical in such a religious context (and one can see how Badiou could be easily taken *out* of context here); however, if one recognizes that love *itself* is not transcendental and one focuses instead on how love can most certainly help re-center One's identity, cast it aside in light of a (ethical) love connection with another, thus forging the Two, then it's the "experience" that elevates both entities, simultaneously—*this* is the place for implementing such words as ethical and ethics (see pages 23-26 in *In Praise of Love*). Now, in regards to a response to critics and thinkers like Zizek (who is not mentioned specifically by name, at least in this text), I think the book itself, *In Praise of Love*, aside from the clarity of its thrust, as we've begun to see, also acts as a meta-recognition of love's significance amongst the four truth procedures in the mere fact that it was created.

foundational to a rebuilding amongst the originary event (here, hypothetical) and the pull of its subsequent cleft stimulates the encounter between the Two beings of a love encounter and experience. This is why Badiou is quite resolute in stating: “my own philosophical view is attempting to say that love...is a quest for truth” (22). This truth-journey surpasses romantic and erotic definitions of love, and most certainly commercial (capitalistic) differentiations—or, perversions—of love. But to return to Badiou’s conception here of truth: *what* kind of truth does love quest *for*? Badiou continues:

truth in relation to something quite precise: what kind of world does one see when one experiences it from the point of view of two and not one? What is the world like when it is experienced, developed, and lived from the point of view of difference and not identity? That is what I believe love to be. (22)

Badiou claims that love can be any number of things, but things that are always rooted in the challenges faced by difference between Two rather than just a singularized One. And as we will see momentarily with the numbered phototextual gears churning in *House of Leaves*, fidelity to the significant events perpetuated by the odd house, and its studiers, its characters, its associated individuals, with all of these people—and their differences—the structural perplexity, the stupefactions at whom is ‘really’ talking and narrating, and what *kind* of visual or textual medium is doing this narrating: all of these identifications take a back seat to the eruptive, *ethical* difference of evental-born love rendered *through* photographic image-making in its varied formulae.

Of course, in regards to Badiou’s incessancy of ‘the encounter,’ I would hasten to add that the phototextual elements of the *House of Leaves* novel not only just serve as a conduit for such encountering(s), but also that such photographic mechanisms elevate the truth decreed by an ethical love; elevate not in the sense that it is grander to something inversely not involving photography, but that this said elevation instead builds

a fidelity which is more 'advanced,' or more durable, or even more experienced. Or perhaps, *lovelier*.

### A Lighting Labrynth

Up until this point, I have really only spoken of The Event as something conjectural, even within the fixed parameters of Badiou's regularly allocated and logical concretizations. I needed to first layout a particular theoretical groundwork. Now, contiguously placing this ethical understanding and handling of the truth-event alongside some 'real' phototextually articulated moments in *House of Leaves* will result, I anticipate, in a brightening passageway that ventures down all those anterior lines of ethical inquiry this chapter proposed thus far to survey. Relatedly, some key questions this subsection will try and address: how does/can Danielewski use photography to consult with a fidelity towards the eruptive events existent in such a strange (meta)text? In *Infitintely Demanding*, Critchley speaks of anger and frustration as giving rise to ethics<sup>38</sup>—does this not correspond to so many of the events in *House of Leaves*, as well as a procedural love that voids such hindrances? The *infidelities* and strain in Navidson and his partner Karen's relationship is certainly a driving force (as is the stiffness between Navidson and his brother Tom), the emotionally violent tension inside commentator Johnny Truant's life

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<sup>38</sup> In a point-by-point address to the six specific segments where he disagrees with Critchley's book, Badiou speaks most lucidly on this very point of anger and frustration, even though he has some problems articulating it, or at least he acknowledges the dual nature of his critique: "that is my difficulty. I think that we can have, naturally, negative feelings, negative experiences concerning injustice, concerning the horrors of the world, terrible wars, and so on. But I don't think that all that is the creative part of a new political subject" (160). Critchley and Badiou's exchange here is born from a disagreement on anger and frustration in the context of them being "the first political emotion[s]" (Critchley 130). My concern with these very human emotions—as foils to *love* even—stems from their omnipresence in many threads of the *House of Leaves* phototext as apolitical items, as indeed negative pieces but pieces that manifest ethical engagement via the photographic means my study has examined thus far.

between himself, his mother, and his step-father, even the hazy existence of the text's main "author" Zampano: *all* of these characters are clouded, from time to time, with heavy doses of anger and frustration, so much so that each narrative comments to one another about these matters, either through transparent textual reference (such as a Truant footnote), or a more global, thematic parallel.<sup>39</sup> But, per Critchley, it is anger and frustration that does truly proliferate an ethics, or that *reveal* the dormant event(s) to be truthfully navigated: so, are phototextual encounters the best way to reconcile, rectify, and remedy such routings? I will claim as such, and building off of Badiou, who in turns builds off of Critchley's 'negativity,' it is such an antagonistically-birther ethics that will allow room for *love* to appear as the *truly* revelatory impetus in this phototextual rigor. Finally, Fabien Tarby asserts that it is "necessary to name the event, to recognize its *trace* and to become '*incorporated*' within it" (143); so, as an important supplementary question, how does *House of Leaves* use photographic ethics to maneuver *with-in* the event itself, within the surreal and disturbing eruption of an ever-growing and ever-shifting<sup>40</sup> house, a house that is bigger inside than outside, and therefore paradoxically

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<sup>39</sup> For example, chapter V of *House of Leaves* demonstrates both of these possibilities quite well. But leading into this, it is at the end of Chapter IV, when Navidson first discovers the paradox of the house's incongruous size, though he and Karen refuse to acknowledge the strangeness: "they denied the paradox by swallowing it whole. Paradox, after all, is *two irreconcilable truths*" (39). Then Chapter V itself engages in a lengthy exploration on "the importance of space" (41); Danielewski here, as in so many other places, exhibits a double (ethical?) meaning and is referring to both the material spatiality of the house's unfathomable chasm, as well as the space growing between Navidson and Karen. Additionally, Truant's extensive footnotes in this chapter reveal a space between himself and those near to him, a space that he verbalizes through the imagination of violent—the culmination of an anger and frustration—acts he does to his boss.

<sup>40</sup> Released just a year prior to Danielewski's novel, Jacques Attali's study, *The Labyrinth in the Culture and Society: Pathways to Wisdom* is in itself a curiously composed, meta-aware labyrinthine work. In it, Attali explores the multi-faceted labyrinth throughout history via aphoristic musings written on the eve of a new millennium; he posits that the labyrinth, through its meandering path, is the *best* way to disclose knowledge and truth

forming a complex and dark labyrinth within its own impossible borders? Through an assessment of these assorted contours of inquest, my aspiration here is to draw closer to an approximation of reply, closer to something of a truth, to something *on* truth.

N. Katherine Hayles has astutely claimed in her oft-cited study that *House of Leaves* is “camouflaged as a haunted-house tale,” and instead exists much more unmistakably as “a metaphysical inquiry worlds away from the likes of *The Amityville Horror*. It instantiates the crisis characteristic of postmodernism, in which representation is short-circuited by the realization that there is no reality independent of mediation” (779); this initial assessment fastens to the epigraph at the top of this chapter, which I want to stress comes at *the* very outset of the novel. Hayles, and many others, scrutinize the layers and layers of (re)mediation in the novel, exploring the curiosities inherent in a novel that employs so many other genres: photography, film, music, painting, collage, poetry, and so forth. According to Hayles, such a

frenzy of remediation attempts to eat all other media. This bingeing, however, leaves traces on the text’s body, resulting in a transformed physical and narrative corpus...it is an open question whether this transformation represents the rebirth of the novel or the beginning of the novel’s displacement by a hybrid discourse that as yet has no name. (781)

The interactions within the text itself figure on various forms of medial pageantry, the traces of the text’s *spoken* body resulting in a *speaking* narrative, and the hybridized dialogue that percolates to the top: are not these the makings of the existentially and

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(which is why, he argues, that societies keep designing them, perpetuating them, in both material and digital forms). Danielewski’s novel, dealing with the labyrinth on multiple textual levels, could easily be seen as something of an amusement in its self-aware games, but one that seeks to uncover truth nonetheless, even if that truth is something of the existence of a *truth-void*. As Attali asserts: “some of these amusement labyrinths effect distortions (*another means of becoming “other”*), and some also change their form while one is going through them” (93-94, emphasis mine). Danielewski’s house—both as ‘plotting device’ and as material text—is an ever-shifting and always-growing *thing*: they writhe with/in such a distortion.

essentially ethical reading experience? Furthermore, it is the above media 'genres'—specifically, powerfully, those imagistic ones, those of both still and motion photography—that allow the text's transformative and evental traces to be witnessed. Sascha Seiler also concludes with a similar impulse regarding the transformativity professed by Danielewski's novel, in the final paragraph of his essay, Seiler too wonders about

a transmedial experience, incorporating different media within as well as transcending its covers...in the case of *House of Leaves* combining text, film, pictures, and the Internet through different ways of arranging as well as transcending text, in a linguistic as well as in a material way. Maybe the future of the book as a medium lies in this dichotimic way of approaching the medium of the printed word. (117)

Such combined figural processes, then, operate as fundamental objects in a transformative proficiency; the tangible phototext is eventually carved-out from the proximal difference of the Two witnessed in the figural and the textual. But now, I allege, the phototextual *House of Leaves* ruptures outward, like concentric circles in water, with its own inherent event (in other words, the center has supplemented, shifted), and the truth-processes of understanding the event are mediated, *both through and by*, the photographic itself.

Nathalie Aghoro argues that the excessive use of literary-academic devices such as footnotes, in addition to the unconventional textual formatting of certain chapters, "both mirror the characters' aimless wanderings through the house and prove that making sense of impossible events is an endeavor never entirely successful" (67). Furthermore, Aghoro seeks to work outwards from Mark B.N. Hansen's observations that "the novel insistently stages the futility of any effort to anchor the events it recounts in a stable recorded form" (qtd. in Aghoro 67). Yet, what of the meta-*content*, do not the phototextual rudiments of such footnotes provide for truth-seeking amongst such "impossible events?" And can one *truly* "find success" and/or "make sense" of the event,



especially if we read the event in the Badiouian manner as something of an endless exchange *inside* (of) the mathematically infinite? One can one apply a devout fidelity to the understanding of the event, with the significantly assumed caveat that the event is not something to be 'solved;' we learn by the end, that the house's labyrinthine halls *are* infinite, and thus attend to the perfect meta-model for the eventually infinite.

Thus, I am highly reluctant to say that all of these critics have failed in their readings, because they have not, for their contributions have greatly aided with my own understanding of this tremendous and complex work. Yet, it does seem more than peculiar, and even admittedly exasperating, that they appear to not follow such critical thought to something more meticulously unturned, something resembling the terminus of a towards-closure: *how* does this transmedial or transformative or transcendent text display an ethical piquancy for comprehending an eventual immediacy rendered by photographic possibilities? I think that even despite the text's self-awareness, its tiers of re-mediation, and Daniewlewski's own outward, enthusiastic penchant for theoreticism, something of a closure could still be managed. In fact, the text itself calls out for such eruptive eventual truth.

Now, as for this lastly noted complication of Daniewlewski's theoretical underpinnings: any perfunctory investigation of his educational pedigree<sup>41</sup> uncovers his close affinity for critical theory, deconstruction, and the works of Heidegger and Derrida, the latter in particular, though both of whom play a direct (through actual footnoted reference or the way certain textual symbols appear) and indirect (through various *thematized* parallel structures of the text, such as the spiraling staircase and spiraling

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<sup>41</sup> A common place to start with this, it seems, is the interview with Daniewlewski conducted by Larry McCaffrey and Sinda Gregory found in: *Critique* 44.2 (2004): 99-135. Aside from a highly formalized Yale and UC Berkeley collegiate experience, Daniewlewski's avant-garde filmmaker father also played a huge role in his visual education, as did his father's death.

logic of the text) role in the novel overall. Mark C. Taylor's reading of Danielewski's work in his book *Rewiring the Real*, speaks to this important acknowledgement of Derrida and his own puzzling work, *Glas*. In fastening *House of Leaves* with *Glas*, Taylor concludes:

trace the connections of any name, date, episode, or reference, and you will become entangled in shifty connections that ceaselessly transform meaning as they multiply. In this way, the text becomes a labyrinth whose very openness leaves no exit...and as Derrida insists, 'even today the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself.' (138)

Critchley reminds us, too, in the essay "Derrida's Reading of Hegel in *Glas*," that:

"indeed, the text does not have an end, in the sense of an organized telos" (25), for the work 'concludes' with an incomplete sentence. And of course there is the matter of how both works, *House of Leaves* and *Glas*, so often just *look* similar with their variously built columns of dialogic text defying traditional print- and bookmaking norms. Additionally, Aleksandra Bida rightly argues in an essay on Derrida's theories of hospitality (I already spoke at some length of hospitality in the previous chapter) in *House of Leaves*: while the novel "does not reference Derrida's examination of the concept of hospitality" (55), it *does* possess a cognizant and indirect occurrence therein; Bida reminds us that the concept of making a home to *everyone*, everywhere is ultimately a matter of an "absolute hospitableness," or a home-invalidating, unqualified impossibility which Derrida so Derrideanly labels: "hostipitality" (57).

My point in evoking Derrida's multiple considerations within *House of Leaves* is to finish the following distinct line of thought: primarily that such texts—both *House of Leaves* and, say, *Glas*—are built ethically; and in this case, firstly their egalitarian treatment of characters' desire for the loving warmth of an at-homeness, but also, secondly, in the ways that the respective speakers' multi-vocal/multi-*visual* constructions manifest an important readerly event, an eventual situation that engenders not only the realizing of the above ethical discourse at *play*, but also that the textual events 'force'

readers, *both within and outside of the novel*, to uncover the truth, or the truth that there may not be a truth. Finally, I would posit, that the photographic layers Navidson qua Danielewski lovingly employs help pad the blow of such an onslaught of *real-ization(s)*.

And such un-self-conscious ponderings of Hayles, Seiler, Taylor, and the others above, deftly *speak* to the presence of something involving the encounter, the experience with the very text, and the layers within it, as a multipictious entity: the 'hybrid,' the 'dichotomous,' the 'different ways of arranging as well as transcending;' such dictions all alludes to something of an ethical significance, of a flourishing coming-togetherness. Yet, such critical phrasings *only* allude, they do not simultaneously *name* Danielewski's work as unquestionably exploring the ethical *through* these mediated/remediated functions: that final leap in designation is never made. Take for example, the moment of the book when the old blind narrator Zampano is still in the early stages of discussing *The Navidson Record*, the non-existent film that serves as the novel's backbone, his analysis of Navidson's unremitting desire to record, to capture images, yields the following reflection at the end of Chapter III:

Perhaps one reason Navidson became so enamored with photography was the way it gave permanence to moments that were often so fleeting...more than just snapping a few pictures and recording daily events with a few Hi 8s, Navidson wanted to use images to create an outpost set against the transience of the world. No wonder he found it so impossible to give up his professional occupation. In his mind abandoning photography meant submitting to loss. (22-23)

Again, we have Navidson's film footage, appearing through Navidson, appearing through Zampano's 'eyes' (the blind man, it goes, had assistants come and narrate the film's actions to him, thus inserting even another level!), appearing through Truant's reading, appearing through the anonymous Editors' overall textual visions, appearing through a novel penned by Danielewski, and finally appearing by the reading of readers. Now that these baffling levels of (re)mediation have been established—almost humorously so in

their near-ridiculous and deep nestings—how do the photographic apparatuses, existent on *each* level, pertain to an ethical *togetherness*? In my earlier chapters, we saw how both Powers’s and DeLillo’s novels had *some* levels of such mediation, but nothing as convolutedly leveled as Danielewski’s text. Mark B. N. Hansen, in the same eminent article cited by Aghoro above, asserts that: “relations between characters are also a direct function of the agon of media. Such relations develop only because and to the extent that they come together in the common task of documenting the impossible house” (613). Danielewski’s passage above acts as a kind of foreshadowing, as well as a substantiation of Hansen’s thesis here: in the photographic engaging with others, whether it serves to permanentize a moment or not<sup>42</sup>, there is an *act(iveness)* that brings entities together because of its *re-presentational present*; portraitured desires foster it. But how does this struggle between the dynamism/staticism of the phototextual event negotiate itself around and about the spatial sites inherent to the “plot-instigating function of the house” (Hansen 612), that is, around the event of the house’s paradoxical transformation that drives the central agency of actions in the text? A rather conventional look at the novel’s cast of characters serves as entrance point, for a non-conventional truth comes from the Two, from the decidedly non-singularized, the beings-together-with-phototextuality.

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<sup>42</sup> This sends us back to Truant’s “Introduction,” where he comes right out and ‘spoils the ending,’ in a way:  
the irony is it makes no difference that the documentary at the heart of this book is fiction. Zampano knew from the get go that what’s real or isn’t doesn’t matter here. The consequences are the same...false quotes or invented sources, however, all pale in comparison to his biggest joke. Zampano writes constantly about seeing. What we see, how we see and what in turn we can’t see. (xx-xxi)  
Zampano, who we are told is blind, reads Navidson’s film and photography-as-immortalizing as ‘flawed.’ And as we will see later with Navidson’s Pulitzer Prize winning photograph, but is this not also irrelevant for the result, in the eventual instant, is the same: a meaningful encounter, an engagement.

The character of Billy Reston is neither a major nor minor participant here (but, in this text, who is *either*, really?) and consequently he may be something of a 'neutral' entity for an inaugural illustrative purpose. Reston is introduced by means of a lengthy verbal description of his photographic image, an image that shows Reston moments before he becomes permanently crippled by a wire from some errantly collapsing industrial equipment in India where Navidson was on assignment: "Navidson was barely twenty-seven when he first met Reston. Actually it was a photograph that brought them together" (37). And we learn moments later when Navidon, Navidson's brother Tom, and Reston all get together to embark on the initial exploration into the house's chilling maze. Readers learn that Reston hangs the "remarkable 11 x 14 black and white print" in a place of honor in his engineering office:

'That was the last time I had legs," Reston tells him. 'Right before that ugly snake bit 'em off. I used to hate the picture and then I sort of became grateful for it. Now when anyone walks into my office they don't have to think about asking me how I ended up in this here chariot.' (38)

Yet Reston *will* remain somewhat of a vital character throughout the plotted narrative because he ends of saving the members of the exploration party, despite suffering permanent damage to both his wheelchair and his physical body, when the spelunking leader Holloway goes mad in the cold and dark of the labyrinth. Of course, I say that Reston is only somewhat vital, because throughout the course of the work, his existence is also medially augmented through snippets of something called "The Reston Interview," conversations with the engineer appearing throughout the (non-existent) *Navidson Record* film that Zampano studies (there is a 'reminder' in the post-scripted "Exhibits" section that notates to reproduce all transcripts of this interview, but a subsequent footnote by the unknown Editors claim such a facsimile is missing!). But for example, towards the ending, when the house finally begins its long collapse and swallows up Navidson's brother Tom, the mounted Hi 8 cameras, grainy and poorly lit as they are,

capture something of the scene. But in a Zampano-stated footnote—that wonderfully parallels the leitmotif of the entire novel—Navidson trusts on the re-telling of these events by Reston, via Reston's Interview, even though by that point the wheelchair-bound engineer had already left the scene:

by relying on Reston as the sole narrative voice, he subtly draws attention once again to the question of inadequacies in representation, no matter the medium, no matter how flawless...a pointed reminder that representation does not replace. It only offers distance and in rare cases perspective. (346)

Obviously, the entire novel is *seen* through such numbered levels of specific mediation, as Hayles and others have noted already. But in the above scene, Tom goes back into the house to save Navidson's two children, thus sacrificing himself in the process: the ultimate and finalizing ethical arrangement of love. Tom *changes* the situation. But of course these Reston-mediated strata involve film and still photography (and stills taken from moving film), almost as if the types of photographic presentation here were working ethically *amongst* themselves, neither vying for dominance nor battling for prominence in determining the most feasible visual form: Tom's love-manifested event *co-appears* in the photographic-traced event. Such a footnote as the one above referencing the shortcomings of representation: *this* is the truth, the perseverance, the rampancy, and the cognizance of a there-is-no-truth. Danielewski is not taking the easy way out here, nor is he just engaging in some masturbatory postmodern exercise, he is instead utilizing an active, ethical dialogue *on* truth using photography as the perceptible formulae *for* the loving discourse.

Danielewski's many uses of photography in the evidently haphazard *House of Leaves*: where is one to continue with such a thread? Perhaps continuing—haphazardly?—with one of the 'main' characters, Will Navidson. Upon moving into the house, Navidson, having retired from a profession as a photojournalist, sets up motion-

sensing Hi 8 film cameras in every room to incessantly document his new life, his new beginnings with his partner Karen, and their two children. Of course, the majority of *The Navidson Record* (which, again, has a questionable existence) is *seen*, even in a compounded fashion, through the footage from these cameras. Hansen is appropriate to mention how

the novel enacts a subordination of face-to-face relations between characters in favor of ever more highly mediated forms. For example, Karen and Navidson communicate best across the distance of media interfaces: they speak to each other through Hi-8 video diaries and learn more about each other (and themselves) from viewing their documentations of the other than from any form of direct contact. (614)

Again, while Hansen remains unequivocally precise here overall, I do wonder about a singularly specific word selection: “subordination.” Now, this is not to pettily quibble on a very particular choice in diction, but I think I would like to build upon *and* beyond Hansen’s otherwise wholly accurate assertions<sup>43</sup>. Indeed, the characters typically engross each other *across* these levels of mediated display—many others have established this above. However, I would portend that in the phototextual world of this novel, such a manner of exchange simply *works*, it is the best manner in which to operate in *fidelity* to the layered events happening all around, both between the characters in the related narratives as well as with the characters spanning the narrative sheets.

In Meditation Twenty-Three of *Being and Event*, Badiou explains this, in regards to fidelity to the event, and my quoting at length is well intentioned:

the particularity of a fidelity, apart from being evidently attached to the ultra-one that is the event (which is no longer anything more for it than

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<sup>43</sup> Additionally, it seems apparent that Karen’s physical/bodily rescue of Navidson in Chapter XXII surpasses any sort of media “distance,” as Hansen calls it. Of note too: this chapter opens with the four-worded epigraph (attributed to an author named Ino): “*truth transcends the telling*” (522). Does Karen’s fidelity to the event of the house now ‘closing’ its rupture, of her transcending beyond a communicating via film, as Hansen alludes to, does her fidelity recognize and acknowledge a truth? Then of course there is still the matter that the Chapter is told to us via Zampano qua Editors qua Danielewski, no?

existing multiple amongst the others), also depends on the criterion of connection retained. In the same situation, and for the same event, different criterion can exist which define different fidelities, inasmuch as their results—multiples grouped together due to their connection with the event—do not necessarily make up identical parts. (233)

Certainly, various individuals—on both the same *and* different phototextual planes—can claim a fidelity to situationality of the event of the house's otherworldly traits, traits that initiate and commence the overarching agency of the entire narrative. And this is perhaps why Danielewski stresses the presence of analogue photography over a digital complement, as we will see momentarily in terms of Danielewski's implementation of the thoughts of William J. Mitchell below. But, to say for now, it is much more difficult to manipulate chemically-based film and photographic footage, and therefore the fidelity to the event is retained, and actually stressed and scrutinized more exorbitantly in the almost preposterous levels of mediated narration extrapolating on such events. Johnny Truant's opening gambit delineating an altogether possible non-existence of *The Navidson Record* clears the air at the outset: no record of the film can be found. Thus, along Badiou's trajectory, even though the event of *House of Leaves* itself *is*, the criterion differs, for different entities experiencing the event understand different truths of the *said* event therein.

To continue with more on the chief character-photographer of Navidson, who in the novel is mentioned in several instances as being a recipient of the Pulitzer Prize, having won that award for the making a photojournalistic image of a debilitated, starving African girl, with a vulture lurking behind her. Readers learn, by the end of the work, that the recurring name Delial is attached to this girl; the name was cried out in a nightmare Navidson had earlier on (captured on one of his wall-lashed Hi-8 cameras) and is referenced by some of the other characters, such as Reston, in their post-event interviews throughout the work. However, the most important and extended discussion of



his prize-winning photograph comes in Chapter XIX (the last chapter before Navidson attempts his fateful, solo, and final expedition into the house's labyrinth; a fundamental detail). Chapter XIX is atypical in its five page length, but it is five pages dedicated solely to the linguistic examination of the formalistic properties of, and other 'critics' responses to, the sobering image. The chapter contains references to Susan Sontag (one reference is real, the other is humorously invented), *Art News*, *Sight and Sound*, and other sources of art criticism all commentating on the various characteristics of Navidson's composition; from subject positioning, to color, to special framing, and so on. Yet, in all of this chapter's pseudo-academic positioning, it ends with the reminder that: "Navidson never photographed scenery, but he also never photographed the threat of death without interposing someone else between himself and it. Returning to Ash Tree Lane meant removing the other" (422); it meant putting himself into a humane situation where it was only death and himself. An illustration of death as *an* absolute truth? Perhaps, and a truth experienced *because* of the photographic encounter.

In *Logics of Worlds*, Badiou says that in order to fully understand death, we must also allow ourselves to be "accompanied by the theory of the event" (270). Badiou emphasizes that death is not an ontological concept, and as we typically conceive of and "experience its truth with bewilderment and pain" we place ourselves besides it, inauthentically, and we overlook the notion that death is much more than just "something other than inexistence. Death *happens*" (269). Indeed, death *appears* in a logical, tactile form and how we lovingly accept its concretized shape reflects back upon an ethical mode of prevailing. This all builds off from Badiou's earlier work *Ethics*, where he states at the end of his chapter "Ethics as a Figure of Nihilism" that:

the possibility of the impossible, which is exposed by every loving encounter, every scientific re-foundation, every artistic invention, and every sequence emancipating politics, is the sole principle—against the

ethics of living-well whose real content is the deciding of death—of an ethics of truth. (39)

This ‘possibility of the impossible,’ brought to light initially by love (and the other three truth procedures), leads us to the event of the truth-laden ethical interchange. This hypothesis, I would argue, closely parallels the quintessence of *House of Leaves*: the situationality of an impossibly shifting house, though rooted in a reality via un-reality (the catalog of all that it is not, is), ruptures outwards and upwards, and the methodology for this singularized wellspring of truth *is* the loving encounter *with-in* the phototextual.

It should certainly be noted too that Navidson’s photograph (and by proxy, the character of Navidson himself) is modeled after one by the real photojournalist Kevin Carter, who won a Pulitzer in 1994 for what appears, via the textual-compositional description of Navidson’s version in Chapter XIX, of an identically staggering image (Figure 5). And in its ever meta-referential manner, the novel even directly *refers* to the actual man Carter through one of the ‘Editor’s’ footnotes: “this is clearly based on Kevin Carter’s 1994 Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph...Carter enjoyed many accolades for the shot but was also accused of gross insensitivity” (368).<sup>44</sup> Carter, the actual photojournalist, was haunted by all that he saw in his short career and took his own life, the same year as winning the award, a fact that the invented Editors’ completely true footnote claims.

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<sup>44</sup> Judith Butler in the chapter “Torture and the Ethics of Photography: Thinking with Sontag” from *Frames of War*, does posit an important thesis regarding such images: essentially, if one experiences outrage towards the photographer of such images, if viewers deem him exploitative, it is thus an outrage grossly misplaced. Instead, one should be upset at the notion of a world where such events are even allowed to happen at all, and that such photographs should therefore inspire and redirect an outrage that moves towards social justice by means of ethical change. Perhaps this, too, is a form of Critchley’s assertion that ethics are begat from anger and frustration; Butler then finishes this thinking, or at least distinctly brings photography into the ethical fold.

Likewise, after the traumatic experience of living and existing in this abnormal house, Karen decides to make her own film after-the-fact, entitled “A Brief History of Who I Love,” which we learn more about in Chapter XV, not only through Zampano and Truant, but also through a transcript of others’ critical responses to both her and Navidson’s film work. But in her own film, Karen includes a still of his famous Pulitzer Prize winning photograph:

As she explains in a voice-over: ‘the print comes from Navy’s personal collection.’ The same one hanging in their home and one of the first things Navidson placed in their car the night they fled. As the world remembers, the renowned image shows a Sudanese child dying of starvation, too weak to move even though a vulture stalks her from behind. Not only does Karen spend twenty seconds on this picture, she then cuts to a ten second shot of the back of the print, she zooms in tighter and tighter on the lower right hand corner, until her subject finally becomes clear: there, almost lost amidst so much white, lie six faintly penciled in block letters, cradled in quotes—‘Delial.’ (368)

Through such a protracted zoom time, the Delial image brings Karen symbolically closer to Navidson, as well as closer to a humanity; the title of her film is about who she lives and who she loves is both Navidson and Delial and her children and anyone else that has touched her life, it seems.

Karen, not a filmmaker by trade (but she was a model once, a frequent subject herself of the lens’ gaze), endures a lot in creating her loving reply:

the diligence, discipline, and time-consuming research required to fashion this short—there are easily over a hundred edits—allowed Karen for the first time to see Navidson as something other...she again and again saw in his pictures and his expressions the longing and tenderness he felt toward her and their children...on Ash Tree Lane stands a house of darkness, cold, and emptiness. In [her] 16mm [film] stands a house of light, love, and colour. (368)



Figure 5—Kevin Carter's 1994 Pulitzer Prize winning photograph

This is the chapter that really points to, I would argue, Danielewski's contention of *House of Leaves* existing ultimately as a love story. Moreover, in this regard Hansen remains exact in those earlier declarations: the act of creating the phototextual pieces grants the characters to see each other, *to be* closer. Light, love. If Badiou exalts elsewhere in *Ethics*: "I shall call 'truth' (a truth) the real process of a fidelity to an event: that which this fidelity *produces* in the situation" (42); then it is Karen whose film, as well as Navidson's portrait of Delial therein, that manufactures the situationality for a *newly* rupturing event, one now based in recovery, in healing, in love: "by following her heart, Karen made sense of what that place was not...Karen began to prepare herself for reconciliation" (369). Through this film and similarly through saving Navidson during his own final filming exploration, they both will work forwards to a truth.

As for the exploratory nature of Navidson and the others' earlier journeys, Chapter IX, the so-called 'labyrinth chapter,' is the most dizzying in its textual appearance-as-parallel into the enigmatic disposition of the house's (a)mazing structures; thusly, the ideas of absolute truth are called directly into question. In his book *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era*, William J. Mitchell (not be confused with the other visual theorist W.J.T. Mitchell) posits the large thesis that digital images, as opposed to analogue ones, can be manipulated much easier (certainly analogue images can as well, but not with the indifferent ease and readiness of their digital counterparts), and therefore the entire notions of truth of the visual experience are called into question through deconstruction; if Linda Hutcheon invites the infamous claim of photography as being 'the perfect postmodern vehicle,' Mitchell is to amend this further: *digital* photography as the quintessential device of the postmodern era. So, what are we to make of the *fact* that Navidson mediates his imagery through solely analogue phototextual apparatuses? Mitchell's same volume is referenced in a footnote in this very

*House of Leaves* chapter, so my use here of *The Reconfigured Eye* is doubly intentional. It should also be noted, that unlike the majority of the references in *House of Leaves*, the footnote citation assigned to Mitchell is accurately employed, as are seemingly all of the sources speaking to photography and truth in this chapter's section, such as Howard Chapnick's *Truth Needs No Ally: Inside Photojournalism* that is quoted in the novel accurately: "we, the National Press Photographers Associations, reaffirm the basis of our ethics: accurate representation is the benchmark of our profession" (143). Indeed, the quoted material rendered by Zampano qua Danielewski *is true*, the words match up precisely with Chapnick and Mitchell's existing texts, as do the page numbers, title, date of publication: *these are real and veritable sources* in the labyrinth, thereby deepening the comprehensions of truth when most of the sources elsewhere in the novel are flatly false. Even though Zampano-Navidon-Danielewski asserts that "the greatest threat comes from the area of digital manipulation" (141) readers are being manipulated through the analogue means of the larger phototext—how does one disentangle themselves from such a supposed impasse? While the biographical timeline is not wholly a focus here, Danielewski's novel does appear at the turn of the millennium, at a crossroads of shifting technologies between the analogue and the digital, and thus, per Mitchell, at a junction of engaging with Truth then too; Chapter IX explicitly addresses such concerns as well: the ethical co-existence of analogue to digital photography, at least for the time being (will not digital technology inevitably finalize its supplanting of analogue film?). Mitchell's sections, too, often end up with more questions than answers, and crucial interrogations they remain; playing off from Aristotle's definitions of truth, Mitchell probes:

how is it that photographs seem to say of what is that it is? What is the foundation for their undeniably powerful implicit truth claims? When should we be wary of these?...the most useful answers turn out to be intimately bound up with different philosophical doctrines about the nature and meaning of truth. (24)

Though the specific 'philosophical doctrines' of Badiou indeed offer an extremely useful 'answer' (if there is such a thing); according to Badiou in *Ethics*, his exposition of an "ethic of truth' is the principle that enables the continuation of a truth-process...that which lends consistency to the presence of some-one in the composition of the subject induced by the process of this truth" (44). In other words, truth is a fidelity, a devout dedication, towards the unfolding event around the subjects involved, starting first with the individualized subject and then radiating away to those affected in the immediate radius. Danielewski's larger metaphorical positioning of the beleaguered, though robust, differentially-based yet proximally-bound relationship between analogue and digital phototextual apparatuses, *re-presents* the much more focused truth-searchings begotten by the multiple-leveled characters across this same technological chiasmus.

And it is only through the transparent phototextual re-presentations of the narrative's many imagistic 'sheets,' that a truth-disclosure drives onward. Daniel Bensaid says that the event really only "comes about retroactively through the sovereign naming of its existence and the fidelity to the truth which comes to light in it" (97). In other words this is to say that for Badiou, the event is a *past* occurrence only in its perceptive acknowledgment—beings certainly live *through* the event-present, but it is only until that that event branches irruptively into yet another (and this process is infinite), do the borderlines—and *the traces*—of the previous evental 'shape' become apparent, and even these only by a love *towards* fidelity / a fidelity *towards* love. Therefore, it is my own assertion, that in *House of Leaves*, the ethical lovingness of the photographic mediums—in *all* the narrative threads taken individually and collectively—are the prime exemplars of

how both Bensaid's "sovereign naming" *and* "fidelity to the truth" of the event are able and allowed to indeed come *to light*.<sup>45</sup>

Furthermore, in this uniquely introspective essay entitled "Alain Badiou and the Miracle of the Event," Bensaid stresses that in Badiou's philosophic hypotheses,

truth is no longer a subterranean path manifesting itself in the irruption of the event. Instead it becomes a post-evental consequence...although similar to revelation, it still remains a process but one which is entirely contained in the absolute beginning of the event which it faithfully continues. (95)

Indeed, over the course of five 'expeditions,' Navidson returns to the bowels of the house's labyrinth in order to help uncover a truth, a truth *through* his documentation, his filming, and his still photography of the blinding blackness; thus, Bensaid's language has a beautifully poetic double-meaning here: *beneath* the subterreanity of Navidson's house, a dark and cavernous maze appeared in an inexplicable eruption, an eruption both literal and 'other-wise,' and Navidson's progression of return trips demonstrate an exacting fidelity to that particular event—Navidson eventually ceases his trips, but only after the truth-progression of that event achieves closure: Karen rescues him during this final trip and the house, seemingly vanishes completely:

Karen: It just dissolved.

Q: Dissolved? What do you mean?...You're saying the house dissolved?

Karen: [no reponse]

Q: How's that possible? It's still there, isn't it?

END OF INTERVIEW. (524-525)

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<sup>45</sup> I cannot overstate here the hugely archetypal-philosophical (*and* narrowly-employed ontological) metaphor of concretizing 'representation' by means of (a) light. And Danielewski, ever the lyricist and Derridean word-player extraordinaire, would also be one of the first to re-acknowledge the correspondence, here, to the Latinate roots of "photo-graphy" as "light writing," and especially *inside* of a novel where darkness exerts such a preeminent role.



This transcript from Karen's interview comes but a negligible three pages from the end of the *The Navidson Record*; and only a two page scene of the end of Navidson's film remains, a scene showing his children Trick-or-Treating in their new neighborhood in Vermont. But the penultimate scene is imbued and interwoven with passion: Karen saves Navidson. And that is the irrefutable end of the text proper—sure, there are the various appendixes of poems, illustrations, photographs, and indices that continue for another almost two hundred pages, but their miscellany only ever supplements the central narrative. Now of course one could read the “dissolve” of Karen's above statements as relating to that ubiquitous filmic term for what often occurs at the end of a movie, when the images fade away to credits, but either way the term itself denotes something breaking down *in-to* the fragments of finality: to dissolve *is* to find closure; dissolving *is truth*.

#### Truths and Non-Truths, the Truth of Non-Truth

Susan Sontag's *On Photography* opens with this sentence: “humankind lingers unregenerately in Plato's cave, still reveling, its age-old habit, *in mere images of the truth*” (3). Long heralded as revelatory—as well as garnering an assortment of adversarial responses—Sontag's book nonetheless opens with *the* most significant, and rightly timeless, constituent accompanying any discourse of photography, the photographic, and the phototextual phenomenon: the notion of truth. And Sontag's preliminary words do much to emphatically solicit this question, a question she and so many others wrangle incessantly with throughout their writings: are *images* of truth still truth? Really, such is the question bolstering the instituted assembly of *House of Leaves*, throughout *all* of its labyrinthine, complexly mediated narrative strands.

To end with the beginning: in *House of Leaves*, on a single page all its own—after the brief introductory note from the mysterious “Editor,” yet still before the main body of the novel—there is a five-worded dedication, printed in a dark bold ink on a vast white page: “This is not for you” (x). While the typeface is in the Courier style aligned with Johnny Truant’s notations, we cannot say for sure who penned it. Nathalie Aghoro suggests that this very line, this “blunt rejection” may immediately cause readers to balk: “right from the beginning the reader has to come to a decision: should h/she consider the address as a warning, dismiss it as nonsense, or venture further into the text for answers” (63)? Unfortunately, Aghoro never answers her own query but her uncertainty is one of a hearty meta-doubt, in fact: an uncertainty also fitting, of course, of the novel’s over-aching thematics. Upon first opening the book, one may find such a ‘dedication’ slightly off-putting and even unwelcoming: the things of the purely *un*-ethical it seems. Yet, as one works their way through the entirety of the work, the multiplicity of voices lets us tack on the missing thought from this succinct, germinal clause: this is not for you *because it is for us*.

Imbued into the layers of phototextual presence in the event of experiencing *House of Leaves*, photographic elements *are the situation*, the stimulus for a positive, loving, and ethical evolution. Irruptive to readers, to characters, to character-readers, and so on: photography, in all the (re-)mediated deposits, compose the basis of the Event, an event so radically unraveling that an *ethics-of-love* is the premier (and only?) method for disclosing the truth. Returning to Juliet Flower MacCannell’s reading of Badiou, she suggests that

love is the crucial point in his system...for it is only ever experienced (existentially) by the systematic breakdown caused by an Event (in this case, the “loving Encounter”)...to arrive at that other scene of representation, where Being can count from Two, and not from One...*le Deux* becomes a multiple being bound by fidelity to the Truth of its Love. (168)

There is a lot happening here, no? The primary point to reconsider is the experiential infinitude of the evental program, the concept that events propagate other (authentic, truthful) events out of a situational ethical-love to that preceding event. *House of Leaves* replicates this experience the only way it knows how: through presentation, representation, and re-representation; all medial bases are *truly* covered. In warmly wrapped, coldly warped phototextual narratives, Danielewski's novel works-towards a truth that aptly considers truth-as-non-truth: and this understanding can only happen with a Badiouian set of multiples: characters *seeing* characters, readers *seeing* characters, with each kind of arranged variant in between.

In returning to Sontag, we encounter the photographic schema of the Event in a different perspective, but head-on and thoroughly, if not altogether and outrightly frank:

taking photographs has set up a chronic voyeuristic relation to the world which levels the meaning of all events...our very sense of situation is now articulated by the camera's interventions...a photograph is not just the result of an encounter between an event and a photographer; picture-taking is an event in itself. (11)

Undeniably, an event with the irruptive progression *over* other events, or rather, events borne *from* events (hence a progression, as opposed to a command or supremacy), is a meta-situational force with a momentum best rendered phototextually. In the previous subsection, I argued how *House of Leaves* engages with/in such a plan: the residual traces of the house's event—its 'impossible' shift into *something* vast and perverted—the excess of this event is *seen* in the phototextual strata itself: all who experience the text, reader and character alike, find that truths lay *with* a representational ethic-basis of love. This is the truth particular; this substantiates both Badiou's larger theorem of the event, and Sontag's also: events involve phototextual mediation both *inside and outside* the zeniths of their evental horizon(s).

The truth is that fiction, and especially phototextual fiction, deals in the trade of purporting non-truth. But Danielewski's text asserts that this does not rob the phototext of its transformative power, its ethical thrust. Conversely, it emboldens and enlightens it. If for some like, say, Levinas, the image *represented* something 'secondary' and synthetic, something paling in the light of a veritable *saying/seeing* of authentic exchange, Danielewski acknowledges this unavoidable truth—like Badiou, Danielewski's concern rests with a tangible world, and if it takes layers upon layers of textual play to sift that resolution to the surface, with rigor, with dedication, then it still makes the eventual path of truth-procedurals worth taking. Fabien Tarby, on the final page of his book written *with* Badiou, proclaims that: "ethics also consists, then, in human beings' acknowledging the event's existence" (154). Danielewski demonstrates this initial fidelity at the opening level of the text, as if to filter this truth down through each mediated level equally. Peter Hallward, a frequent translator and editor of Badiou, says this about Badiou's theoretical standards: "true ethics must instead be internal to a truth procedure, and consequently indifferent to all objective goods or differences" (256). *House of Leaves* whirls in this indifference and out from it grows love. Moreover, Hallward's ideas segue again into Tarby's final thoughts, here with the definitive heading of "The last word goes to ethics;" Tarby concludes that "being faithful to the event, which is the means by which we become a subject of truth, isn't always easy...this is what *ethics* is" (154). *House of Leaves* is often perceived as not an easy, or even pompous, text; and Badiou's ostensibly labyrinthine thought will continue to find accusations of obscurity. But up from these seemingly dark, maze-like non-truths, wells a spring of vibrant and smoldering truth, a truth lucidly rising on the various phototextual representations found in a fidelity to eventual love of it all.

## Chapter 5

### Traumatic Reversal and the Closeness of Phototextual Touching

“Images have been reproached for being a way of watching suffering at a distance, as if there were some other way of watching. But watching up close—without the mediation of an image—is still just watching.”

-Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*

“The book tells of a search for gestures...using a living language, a language of touch—which would lead us to a closeness while preserving the duality of subjects meeting together.”

-Luce Irigaray, *Key Writings*

“Our faces were so incredibly close.”

-Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*

### Touching the Ethically Pluralistic

This chapter will in some way build off of the notions of love from the previous chapter, but by employing Irigaray’s understanding of the ethical maneuverings of love and the language of *vision* (and: the *vision* of language) to make a lasting and rigorous connection, it will reinforce the significance of the ethical command fundamental to the co-created phototext. Bolster it and newly attach it to the lyrically-rich rigor of Irigaray’s ethereally open thoughts on touch and the loving caress, to offer a new reading of Foer’s ingrained phototextual ethics, primarily. The portraiture work of New York-based photographer Richard Rinaldi will add a supplementary application, reinforcing that such ethical understanding of the Other can take shape in the wordless world of traditional portraiture.

Moreover, in this chapter I shift the discussion towards texts—literary, photographic, and critical—that all appear after the 9/11 event. I contend that a premier methodology for opening the process for traumatic healing can be found in the manner that specific phototextual productions implement the concept of the ethical touch. Naturally, trying to engage in any sort of meaningful critical response regarding the eventual cleaving of 9/11 leaves one utterly exhausted on the overwhelming emotive possibilities, and even futilities, in attempting to run through such an analysis. Furthermore, the degree to how much eventual dividing occurred could be debated on multiple levels. Indeed, all aspects of philosophical and cultural theory, it seems, have something to offer in the way of a reading on the event, but I think one thing remains consistently clear: the discourse *has* shifted, conversations *have* changed, and more importantly the *manner* in which such dialogues now transpire has altered as well. Don DeLillo, Paul Auster, Philip Roth, John Updike, and Claire Messud have all penned critically decorated novels that, at their cores, navigate a catalogue of varied post-9/11 intricacies. Ethics may not have collapsed and burned along with those skyscraping structures, but it has indeed changed its course, how it is conducted and for whom, and how it is understood<sup>46</sup>. Perhaps this is why Jonathan Safran Foer’s own contribution to

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<sup>46</sup> I think Slavoj Žižek’s *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2001) and Judith Butler’s *Prearious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004) are the two works most relevant to my own study here, though there are undoubtedly others. But in regards to the latter, Ilka Saal sums up Butler’s assertions nicely:

[she] points out that while the event momentarily disrupted the American nation’s narcissistic understanding of itself...the narratives triggered in its wake immediately shored up a first-person perspective that reasserted impenetrable boundaries between self and other. (454)

And Saal herself continues on, using Butler’s “concern with ethics” (454) as a guide, to denote how Foer’s novel works against such a structure and reframes the discourse of trauma, ultimately asking “in what ways and for what ends does Foer’s novel engage the pain of others?” (455). My present chapter will work towards a sense of closure for this query, albeit on a slightly different path from Saal’s remarks, which look towards something she dubs “trauma transfer,” that is, the manner of reading present traumas

the assortment of 9/11 novels, *Incredibly Loud & Extremely Close*, is the ideal work for my own current project. For not only does Foer's book engage in a kind of mixture of 'new' and 'old' ethical models, it does so inside a cohesive phototextual closeness—by both linguistic and imagistic phototextual avenues—it seeks out and finds an understanding *with-in* the traumatized Other through a touching; a touching both physical and *metaphysical*, a touching brought to light *by* a series of photographic propagations prompted by the main character, nine-year old wunderkind Oskar Schell and his journey through New York City to solve a mystery left by his father who was killed in the 9/11 attacks (Oskar never names the event as such, and instead calls it the “worst day”). Such phototextually ethical structures allow for a reading of the novel that enhances its typical analysis through the lenses of trauma theory. Furthermore, as a substantiation of the larger argument, I will also draw upon the relatively recent photographic portraiture project *Touching Strangers*, by New York-based photographer Richard Renaldi. In brief, Renaldi's street portraits feature subjects, typically just a pairing, who have never met before but are found and arranged by him to engage each other on a physical level, thus giving a many-layered meaning to the project's name: Renaldi's arrangement involves him touching the strangers to get them into the desired position;<sup>47</sup> the strangers are

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through the historical lens of previous ones, thus rendering something of a collective trauma than can be negotiated more globally. I seek to interrogate how the eventual irruption of present trauma can disclose a healing through an envisioned touching of a phototextual saying.

<sup>47</sup> In a short two-and-a-half-minute segment about Renaldi produced in 2013 by CBS for their national nightly news program, we can witness but a glimpse of Renaldi's work methods: how he finds, talks, touches, and engages with his “strangers.” Furthermore, in the afterward to the *Touching Strangers* book, Renaldi credits his open, almost fearless, approach to growing up with little adult supervision as a gay teen in urban Chicago and how he would proposition men sometimes twice his age, a biographical reference that may lend itself to his long history of engaging with difference. But in regarding his methods that produced the products seen in *Touching Strangers*, the striking and obvious irony is, at least according to the few subjects interviewed in this video piece, that by the

always shown in a moment of close physical contact in the final image; and the viewers themselves also experience a sort of poignancy—an emotionally sensual touching—in the *feeling* from the final, powerfully resulting shot.

Indeed, as the epigraphs to this chapter also clearly indicate, there is a vigorous theme at work here in these phototexts regarding *closeness*. Foer's novel even initiates such a thematic right in its title; his efforts attempt to negate the kind of deficiency raised by Irigaray, who in the introduction to her self-edited *Key Writings* claims that: “we lack a culture of proximity or closeness which has to accompany the discovery of other as other” (6). Through both of her interrelated books, *The Way of Love* (2002) and *Sharing the World* (2008), Irigaray also writes at length on the importance of recovering this void, this dearth of cultural closeness we are in danger of regularly facing, by calling on the significance of the touch and the caress in all of their sensual pretenses. It is in these two curious books, according to Emma R. Jones, where Irigaray advances “a *vision* of a new kind of dialogue...that would re-invigorate, or even reinvent human experiences of language, knowledge, and interpersonal relationships” (26). It is such the fresh dialogue of these two works, structured by Irigaray in the context of exploring sexual difference, that is of concern for my current reading of Foer's novel, as well as Rinaldi's portraiture. As Irigaray's “dialogical and ethical project” (Jones 26), and the conversation on closeness “she envisions” (26), use models of sexual difference, *the* originary codex of human difference—and an important part of both Foer and Rinaldi's respective phototextual projects, let's not forget—Irigaray's two books also do so by means of rigorously extending important, larger discourses regarding love and the touch, most

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end of the brief yet potent process, everyone involved feels *less* of a stranger (Rinaldi's large format camera requires subjects to remain very still during exposure) to one another, each before going their own separate ways. See the YouTube video of the CBS segment at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SELDTUaHRxQ>.



notably, to engage *with-in* conversations that *go beyond* sexual difference. Lisa Watrous is correct to corroborate what we have just seen, that for Irigaray, “sex is the primary difference between people” (67). While acknowledging this, I will also maintain that in Irigaray’s call for the diachronic language of vision and vision of language, readers can also embark on phototextual meetings that negotiate a myriad of other significant differences as well.

Due to the earlier appearance of his text, Irigaray is almost entirely absent<sup>48</sup> from Derrida’s final book, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, but Derrida *does* diligently question both Levinas’s and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological understandings of the touch as something distinct *from* the caress. According to Derrida, those latter two thinkers say how “the caress goes *beyond*. The caress transcends touch, sensibility” (78). However, it is with Nancy’s sense of touch, and I would also strongly argue Irigaray’s more lyrically expressed demarcations, that attend to what Derrida dubs the “prephenomenological” *and* the “transphenomenal” (1), for a dynamic touching also involves a component of something extremely *visual*: “let’s see, can eyes manage to touch, first of all, to press together like lips...if two gazes look into each other’s eyes, can one then say that they are touching? Are they coming into contact—the one with the other” (2)? But as for this

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<sup>48</sup> *On Touching* appeared in 2000, and by 2003 Derrida was quite debilitated with pancreatic cancer, so he was obviously not privy to the poetic thought of these two later works of Irigaray’s. In *On Touching*, her only appearances come as relegations to endnotes, endnotes regarding her earlier works from the 1990s, works that do however explore such relevantly important concepts like “re-touching,” the notion of the self-touching occurring inside the exchanges between sexual difference (this re-touching, too, also conveys the idea of a repeated engagement, a returning). And it is such “auto-affection” that will inform her clearly delineated progression, in *The Way of Love* especially, where finding authenticity with oneself is mandatory in the multi-stepped process before even attempting an encounter with a (sexuate) Other. By *Sharing the World* a few years later yet, Irigaray is even more explicit on this journey: “if we are not faithful to ourselves, approaching the other proves to be impossible” (8). So, Derrida is apt to recognize these germinations of “the unfurling of this logic” (n. 5 347) of re-touching, of the auto-touch, the self-touch; he was just not around, unfortunately, to see *how* this logic plays out so beautifully in Irigaray’s two aforementioned books.

relationship between the thought of Nancy and Levinas on touch and the caress, Derrida concludes that: “one day, together and separately, one will indeed have to reread these two thinking approaches to the caress...[these] contradictory injunctions, thus, at the heart of the touch” (76-77). So, while such theories of touch—touch as theoretical, as something epistemologically exploratory, and touch as something *preceding* the caress—remain *open*, the sum of Derrida’s pluralistically ethical reading of touch does demonstrate an admirable resoluteness for an egalitarianism, a semblance that *speaks to* the larger meta-ethical configurations—where structure echoes content and content echoes structure—at work here in this chapter and my project as a whole. However, it is Irigaray’s self-purported “new philosophy of the caress” (*Key Writings* 18)—she seems to use ‘caress’ and ‘touch’ more interchangeably, perhaps then reconciling the division Derrida identifies—that shall inform the phototextual readings in this present chapter.

Again, as mentioned above, Irigaray comments on the shortage of a strong cultural fidelity for the production of an authentic and genuine closeness, and she goes on to reiterate how

as far as sensibility is concerned, we lack a culture which is both subjective and intersubjective. Such a culture would require being faithful to the reciprocity in touching-being touched...in communal relationships...there should be care about preserving a reciprocal touching in the act of communication. (18)

Thus is the *touchstone* site for the *thing* wedding body and language to one another, for the novel theory that maintains the equilibrium between metaphysical query and bodily re-presentation. And, as I will contend momentarily in this chapter, Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* demonstrates a literary trace of such a balanced and reciprocal schemata.

Ross Watkins, drawing in turn on the work of Pascal Lefevre, points out that when “various pictures are grouped together in a series or sequence, the viewer or

reader is prompted to look for relations among them” (qtd. in Watkins 12). Later,

Watkins himself concludes in regards to Foer’s specific novel that:

in addition to style, however, I propose that the effective space generated from word and image combinations contains the most significant potential for illustrated books to mediate trauma and difference...in this way, the conditions of this effective and arguably ethical space may be applied to any illustrated book. (12-13)

Therefore, according to Watkins, the phototext *is* premierly ethical—an assertion that this whole project adheres to, as we last saw with Danielewski’s multi-medial *House of Leaves* in the previous chapter. Indeed, the mere presentation of images alone, irrespective of their figural content, is in itself ethical, as readers have to *shift* between the different forms of representation. However, while Watkins is fully correct in his reading, which is that Foer’s novel

as a narrative form able to articulate the experience or witnessing of disaster via the creation of *spaces* (effective, ethical) between words and images [and] that the ‘closure’ required by the reader in the act of interpreting these spaces is central to representing the ‘unrepresentable,’ (11)

Watkins does not account for *how* Foer’s poly-vocal novel implements these effective, ethical spaces. In other words, what specifics, in *both* the linguistic and imagistic narrative threads, demonstrate this *speaking* to these spatial sites? Working towards a detailed response via Foer’s novel will comprise most of the remaining bulk here. But moreover, what also can the philosophical writings of Irigaray add to this on-going conversation—how do her expressive ruminations on touch, on closeness, and on a subsequent transcendence therein link in this response through Foer’s phototext?

Watkins’s above reading is most genuine and certainly admirable, yet still incomplete in offering a fully formed *ethical* picture, for maybe this aspect is outside the scope of his work. But I will contend that the work of Irigaray, and her related secondary thinkers, when thought in tandem with Foer’s novel, open up what we will soon see

Irigaray defining as a “threshold;” that is, a doorway of meaning down the path towards an enlightened (en)closure to being-with-the-other<sup>49</sup>. If Watkins and others only focus primarily on the images proper, what are readers to make of the corresponding word-based phototextual encounterings? Furthermore, in order to truly demonstrate ethical ethics in its absolute form, we must shine a brighter light on the identifying factors that make this fictional text *meta*-ethical, for as we know from previous chapters, thus is defining brunt of the ethical lunge. Watkins accurately points to the mediation between word and image and how such a structure raises positive ethical interrogations of trauma through the negation of both processes an surface-level meaning in the word-image binary. However, what the words and images—the phototext, *par excellence*—are *saying* is of paramount importance. In other words, a text that just has a shared grouping of word to image is only ethical in the most primary sense—what an examination of Foer’s textual details, alongside Irigaray’s theories, will demonstrate is the novel’s critical status as a purely meta-ethical phototext, and therefore a fecund exemplar of the influence of postmodern American literature in encountering with essential metaphysical discourse through photographic proximity. For without closeness, an incredible closeness, there cannot be a sharing of the world (a world that contains traumas), a sharing of sense, a sharing of *touch* in all its sensible delineations. After all, as Irigaray asks in her ponderingly lyrical essay, “When Our Lips Speak Together:” “how can I touch you if you’re not there?” (69); indeed, *all* touching—physical, visual, and otherwise—mandates a respectful proximity.

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<sup>49</sup> I implement the term (en)closure here as to imply something *nearing* closure of the metaphysical relationship maintained by the proximal touch, yet to still maintain the infinite exchange such a touch adheres to in my context.

### Through the Threshold of Touch

Immediately after one parts the cover on the hardback edition of Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, and they move past the red endpapers, and before even reaching a title or copyright page, they will find a sequence of three black and white photographs. The first photograph shows a keyhole, gaping and white in its emptiness, below a somewhat ornately designed handle. The photo is clear and unmistakable in its demonstration, readers know exactly what they are *seeing*: the caption-less image is a close-up, a zoomed-in depiction representing its formal elements as larger than life. And while the smaller paperback copy might be more accurate in the size as compared to a 'real life' door knob and keyhole, this remains mostly immaterial as the representatively scaled distance is the same: we are *incredibly close* to this empty keyhole. Close to this keyhole, and accordingly to this mystery too, and to this *threshold*. A threshold in many senses, the literal (doorway to another room or place) *and* the metaphysical (moment of an illuminated opening on the path towards the Other). Thus, it is here, right at the onset, through a (at least) dual-layered interpretative sign, that we already can begin to see the connections to the ethical writings of Irigaray. Take for instance the section, "The Path Towards the Other" in *Sharing the World*, where Irigaray states:

without being aware of one's own world and recognizing the world to which the other belongs, entering into relations with him, or her, proves to be impossible...this discovery already opens a threshold with regard to a previous culture, and perceiving this threshold could help to sense the threshold or thresholds that exist between myself and the other, the other and myself. (4-5)

These words all but open her book, for they do appear quite early on. Correspondingly, Foer's photograph, which of course should actually be attributed to the central character Oskar's Grandfather-gifted camera, *opens* his book, beginning the journey of discovery—the quest seeming emblematic of the trauma narrative—but initiating a similar

(meta)physical awareness: a door knob, an empty keyhole—these things *go* somewhere, *lead* to something, or truly, *some-one*.

Now, Foer designs his novel in a curious manner, most notably that there is something of a thread parallel to Oskar's about Oskar's Grandmother's living in Dresden during the fierce, U.S.-led bombing campaign of World War II. This clearly acts as a traumatic-parallel thread and this does add something of a tone of leveling and balance in addition to a kind of universality by linking trauma of catastrophic war-events. Matthew Mullins demonstrates how these two narrative threads help create a "traumatic solidarity...a bond between identity collectives based on the common experience of trauma" (301), which is something speaking to the ethical make-up of the narrative. Furthermore, Ilka Saal mentions how "the grandparents' fragmented narratives thus form a sober-counterpoint to Oskar's adventure story, reminding us of the essential incommunicability of trauma" (458); indeed, the grandparents' Dresden thread also talks about the debilitating nullity trauma can have, how it can bring the lurking presences of Nothing to light. However, with that all said, the scope of my own present chapter will focus predominately on Oskar's thread, because of the prevalence of the photographic encounters *and* his *use* of the phototextual spaces therein (although the camera was his grandfather's—therefore, the apparatus does connect both threads, both temporal-traumatic sites). This present chapter could not wholly ignore the balancing narrative strand of the grandparents' history, for just as Watkin's image-word binary demonstrates a phototextual ethics, the grandparents' linguistic thread speaks to the proximity and distance of Oskar's language-based thread, but for the sake of a directed study the remainder must focus on Oskar's journey; the role and purpose of the grandparent's narrative is not without note, but the discussion here will turn primarily towards Oskar's own phototextual dynamism.

Indeed, this subsection will look *closely* at specific linguistic and photographic passages by Oskar in Foer's novel; subsequently, this chapter portion will also further the argument that Richard Rinaldi's *Touching Strangers* portraiture project corroborates an even more instructive and insightful position when viewed as a sort of absolute-visual "equivalent" to those same concerns laid out in Foer's more literary affair. Thusly, even though it appears roughly a third of the way through the novel, I would like to begin with one of Oskar's most important interactions, that with the character Abby Black. The moments of Oskar's early interactions with Abby thrive with a vibrancy rich in ethical multiplicities—my epigraphic selection above comes from this extended and intense interaction in *closeness*. And it is in such layered aspects that are designed to, what I'll contend, demonstrate how Foer's deployment of phototextual touching not only operates as a means to engage with (and ultimately work towards a healing of) traumatic grieving, but that such moments can also act as archetypal models for something *transcendent of* the traumatic event, something more basic, and that such phototextual engagement works as an unsullied modus for respectful and *essential* interaction with a photographable Other.

After Oskar finds a key amongst his father's things in an envelope labeled with the word "Black," his investigations determine that the word actually refers to a surname and thus Oskar sets out on a methodical quest to meet and talk with every person with that last name in New York City (his quest is organized by the alphabetizing their first name). Due to a fears of mass transit and of strangers (the implication here is the anxiety has worsened since the 9/11 attacks, which Oskar refers to as "the worst day"), Oskar sets out on foot, sometimes walking for hours on end. The forty-eight year old Abby Black is one of the first people he meets on his excursion. They also meet again later on in the novel, thereby reinforcing the impact of their encountering.

When Oskar first arrives at Abby's apartment, she greets him at the door and Oskar immediately blurts out how he finds her attractive. Going through the scene we then can eventually understand this to be his way of articulating the inarticulate connection he feels towards her in that instant. We also receive hints of Abby's own personal marital trauma. Yet, Oskar and Abby end up in the kitchen, where he notes: "I touched a lot of things in her kitchen, because it made me feel OK for some reason" (93). The significance of touching, even at this point inanimate objects such as a microwave, helps ground Oskar's materiality, it helps anchor him in his real world which is hurtling closer to her Abby's own real world. Furthermore, as Oskar is invited in, he also notices some of the photographs adorning the walls, some of which are reprinted in the book, some not. But here in the kitchen, Oskar notices the photograph of the elephant on the wall (it is, in fact, the *only* thing on the kitchen wall we are told) shot in *close-up*, much like the door/keyhole image opening the novel; the photograph is reprinted in the book and we see what Oskar sees: an elephant's eye, with a dark tear trickling down over a network of wrinkled pachyderm flesh. Oskar speaks to Abby: 'I love that,' I told her, and not just because I wanted her to like me. 'You love what?' she asked. I pointed at the picture. 'Thank you,' she said. 'I like it, too.' 'I said I *loved* it.' 'Yes. I *love* it' (94, emphasis in original). What does it mean here to *love* a photograph? Can a *being-with* someone as a shared-world viewer encourage this love?

As I discussed in the previous chapter in regards to Badiou, love is certainly an important phototextual ingredient for initiating the genuine ethical encounter. Lisa Watrous maintains that per Irigaray

we do not yet have the language or the means to ready ourselves for beholding the threshold of another's world. However...as we mindfully prepare ourselves for the presence of another, little by little the way will be opened for meaningful encounters with others of difference...[she] pushes love beyond the romantic and toward a notion of sharing in community where love is the practice and truth is the purpose. (69)



For Oskar and Abby, the photographic 'moments' throughout their initial coming-together serve as a tangible, marked signposting of a threshold along the path towards touching the traumatic Other. Obviously, Oskar and Abby do not interact in a romantic love, though we know that Oskar finds her attractive (and, as we will also see in a moment when Oskar asks to kiss her); in these moments Foer is skillfully balancing something of two planes: not only is he depicting the emotional behaviors of a typical boy, he is also showing how "love dwells in the space between, translating and traversing a path of nearness to the threshold of the world of another" (Watrous 72). In other words, Foer's Oskar is 'love-struck,' but by something that, at first, can only come out as a surface-level declaration. And the fact that they both *love* this photograph, a love discovered through the active clarifications of a co-existent saying *and* seeing, denotes how this will move *beyond* mere superficiality for them both, and for the rest of the others that Oskar encounters, as the narrative progresses.

But in keeping with this scene, we see their commentary deepen, leading to a dialogue on the nature of elephants' reputable abilities for memory, and emotion, and feeling. Oskar and Abby's discussion continues:

'It looks like the elephant in that photograph is crying.' I got extremely close to the picture, and it was true...but just in case, can I take a picture of your picture?' She nodded and said, 'Didn't I read somewhere that elephants are the only other animals that bury their dead?' 'No, I told her as I focused Grandpa's camera, 'you didn't'...'And what would you say?' I took the picture. 'I'd say they were confused.' (96)

Right after Abby and Oskar suspend this portion of their conversation, she begins to cry, to which Oskar is initially confused: "*I'm the one who's supposed to be crying*" (96), he utters. But then Oskar begins to learn more, seeing that he and Abby and Oskar share something of a grief—Oskar with the loss of his father, Abby with the dissolving of an unhappy marriage, an unveiling and saying of trauma that begins *around* an image. While not outwardly acknowledging this very scene, this is an example of what Matthew

Mullins posits in his article on *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* as a “traumatic solidarity as an additional collective that works across group identities...thus, while acknowledging differences, traumatic solidarity is grounded primarily in similarities” (300). In other words, what Mullins is postulating, in paramount, is an ethics: an unanimity that also respects difference, which in the case of Oskar and Abby is a recognized difference between gender and age<sup>50</sup>, primarily, yet they are also unified in their broader traumatic grief and pain, brought to light by crossing through the threshold of photographic saying. Moreover, Mullins states how “Foer shows that trauma should be a unifying experience across boundaries of identity” (308). Mullins is thus again drawing attention here to the together-yet-separate concept inherent in the metaphysical discourse of ethics, to be

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<sup>50</sup> As an intriguing side note: in the 2011 film adaptation of the novel, Abby Black is played by the actress Viola Davis, an African-American, thus adding an aspect of racial difference between her and Oskar. Furthermore, in the film there is also a direct reference to Oskar being somewhere on the autism spectrum scale, perhaps having Asperger’s Syndrome, even though such a reference is made nowhere in the novel (in an interview, Foer says one cannot rule this possibility out however, even if he never explicitly weaves this fact into the narrative as obviously as the film version does). Again, it is possible that such ideas make the strata of difference even more pronounced, but delving into a full film/novel comparison is well outside the scope of this present chapter. But, in the end, do the *number* of differences—as if tabulated like some kind of checklist—truly ‘matter’ if an ethical encounter is still *conducted* in the same genuine route of authentic care and comprehension disclosed by the loving touch? As we will see momentarily with Rinaldi’s portraits, for example, the same query stands, for despite an image that depicts either two white men together, say, *or* a male and a female of difference racial backgrounds together, the end result is touchingly *seen*. Certainly, this is not to undercut the significance of an ethical touching that crosses any number of varying ‘layers,’ but I wonder if it would help to think of these certain differences in terms of an analogy: as stacked, as if on transparent sheets of paper, and that their thicknesses are only minute in comparison to the similarly concluded result of crossing *through* a shared, lucidly visible threshold. These are all big questions and ones not to be easily cast aside, but I am just not sure if I have a clearer answer for some-*thing* where the sums—if the encounter is carried out with absolute fidelity—stand as *metaphysically* (though not bodily?) equal. And on a final, and related, note throughout this chapter I evoke Irigaray’s two works *The Way of Love* and *Sharing the World*, which both use the paradigm of sexual difference to make possible more general metaphysical claims on creating, enduring, and learning from the ethical experience with the other—such a point is related as any narrative of understanding *how* to find both the distance *and* closeness in difference ‘transcends’ any sheer cumulative calculation of those very differences themselves.

sure. Irigaray, in her chapter “The Path Towards the Other” in *Sharing the World*, speaks of sexual difference (Oskar has transcendental experiences with Blacks of both genders), yet she clearly insinuates that an understanding of sexual difference can serve as a ‘model’ for understanding other ‘types’ of difference: the sharing of two worlds is like a Venn diagram, or two Ones (co)building a (co)world:

Rather the question is about the world that each one has to build in order to dwell in their own subjectivity and in this way be able to meet with the subjectivity of the other and enter into exchange with respect for differences, that is, for what is proper to each one. (3)

This is the moment where the circles of a Venn diagram cross, this is the *threshold* that Irigaray speaks of, those gateways that open down the path, those “openings that are deliberately arranged for having access to the other” (8); Foer’s meta-ethical phototext builds such thresholds. Likewise, Oskar realizes that truth comes only by getting *extremely or incredibly* (these two adjectives are repeated many times over throughout the novel) close to it, and, usually, by capturing a photograph along with said closeness, here made even more curious by the layered act of taking a picture of a picture.

Later still in this scene, as the progress of their closeness grows more apparent, Oskar finally gets physically closer to Abby:

when she leaned in to look at the key, her face came incredibly close to my face. We were frozen there for a long time. It was like time was stopped. I thought about the falling body.

Our faces were so incredibly close (97)

That last line even garners its own paragraph, a time-tested tactic in prose for asserting an obvious emphasis. Indeed, Oskar’s progression down the path here leads to a closeness, at first merely physical but then something metaphysical later on; he is coming into proximity, so comfortably, that he even implores Abby for a kiss, thus acknowledging the *difference* between them in age (for he doesn’t seem to fully recognize the

inappropriateness of such a request). As these moments culminate in this initial scene of Oskar and Abby, I will quote at length the apex of their encounter:

I could feel the breath of her words against my face. I asked her, 'Could we kiss for a little bit?'... 'I don't think that's a good idea... I asked why not. She said, 'Because I'm forty-eight and you're twelve.' 'So?' 'And I don't even know you.' 'Don't you feel like you know me?' She didn't say anything. I told her, 'Humans are the only animal that blushes, laughs, has religion, wages war, and kisses with lips. So in a way, the more you kiss with lips, the more human you are.' 'And the more you wage war?' Then I was the silent one... 'I don't think it's a good idea.'... 'Can I at least take a picture of you?' She said: 'That would be nice.' But when I started focusing Grandpa's camera, she put her hand in front of her face for some reason. I didn't want to force her to explain herself, so I thought of a different picture I could take, which would be more truthful, anyway.'

(99)

Ultimately, this is a scene where we can see strangers becoming not-strangers—but what initiates and perpetuates such transference? This scene is *incredibly* rich, and quite numerous, with parallels to the thought existent across several of Irigaray's works over the years, lines of thought that can offer a mode towards disclosure of such an inquest on this movement from being strange to being known to each other.

Primarily, as for this request for a kiss, and Oskar's subsequent commentary on kissing therein, I would like to turn again towards Irigaray's essay from 1980, the tremendously poetic, "When Our Lips Speak Together," as a supportive crutch for unpacking this dense scene. Yet, first, we see that Oskar's opening appeal for kissing comes about as a result from the fact that he can *feel* the breath of Abby's words, words coming into contact with his face—breath, in this context here, *is* the *trace of words*, of an auxiliary language. Such a sensation of closeness engenders an even deeper closeness, *the* closest that two entities can exist yet still remain separate: physical, bodily contact, here signified as a kiss. Certainly, established and acceptable cultural norms regarding an age-based romanticism, eventually talked about later in the passage, deem that they should not kiss, and rightfully so, but the actively ensuing dialogue on the matter

moves them both further along down the pathway: their dialogue, culminated by and in the threshold of the photographic image generates and assists this undertaking. In her essay, Irigaray writes:

Kiss me. Two lips kiss two lips, and openness is ours again. Our “world.” Between us, the movement from inside to outside, from outside to inside knows no limits...these are exchanges that no mark, no mouth can ever stop. (73)

Does my direct alignment of Oskar’s contemplations to such above erotic musings of Irigaray lend credence to what Mullins cites as the oft-leveled “arguments about Oskar’s believability as a nine-year old” (298)? Like Mullins, who asserts that such narratological quarrels “are secondary to the more important ideas of trauma, identity, and community (298), I contend that we can read Foer’s text across the extensive lens of Irigaray’s manifold conceptions on closeness and touch, thus prompting a new authentic interaction *out* of the phototext itself. So, Irigaray’s words above bolster Foer’s, and *visa versa*, reciprocally, for Oskar’s imploration for a kiss with Abby adheres to a similar principle: it is human to kiss, and in this human desire for understanding-in-closeness, knowledge of the Other is collected. Abby’s silence in response to Oskar’s query regarding their status as strangers is telling, I think, though certainly complicated as during their meeting later on in the novel we learn that she was contacted in advance by Oskar’s mother when his mother caught wind of Oskar’s plans for such a knowledge-quest. But in this first meeting, Oskar wants to kiss Abby Black, because kissing is purely human, pure closeness. Judith Still, in an article on Irigaray’s “hospitality of difference” in *Sharing the World*, reinvigorates Irigaray’s proposition for the touch and the kiss as something *representing* an intimate sharing, both literal and otherwise:

that kiss, much as we might recall ‘innocent’ adolescent experimentation...can equally be one of the most meaningful experiences of sharing, of letting the other in to the self, and of experiencing the other’s interior intimacy, a thought that brings us to hospitality in a culture of difference. (49)

Such a sharing, Derrida reminds us, is something that has concerned Irigaray for some time; in her 1992 work *Elemental Passions*: “But when lips kiss, openness is not the opposite of closure. Closed lips remain open. And their touching allows movement from inside to outside, from outside to in” (qtd. in Derrida 348). Kissing is indeed an apt metaphor for the sharing of an interiority/exteriority, an exchange of the flesh. Furthermore, Derrida also remind us that as for the touch of the kiss, the element of “re-touching” is again surveyed, for four lips coming together serves as a quintessential representation of the physical touch, the sharing of touch; in commenting on Irigaray directly, Derrida states how “this re-touching, which always has to do with more than one or more than two lips...passes beyond any terminal or terminological limit, and therefore any discrimination” (348). Despite his probing and precocity, Oskar’s adolescence is a biological fact, a fact that prevents a surface-level, physical touching of lips, at least upon their first meeting. When Oskar returns to Abby’s many months later, the scene below, towards the end of the novel, mirrors the previous from much earlier; their bodies are similarly close, but the *words* are now different:

We were incredibly close.

I could smell her breathing.

She said, ‘If you want to kiss me, you can.’ ‘What?’ ‘You asked me, that day we met, if we could kiss. I said no then, but I am saying yes now.’ ‘I’m embarrassed about that day.’ ‘There is no reason to be embarrassed.’ ‘You don’t have to let me kiss you just because you feel sorry for me.’ ‘Kiss me,’ she said, ‘and I’ll kiss you back.’ I asked her, ‘What if we just hugged?’

She held me against her...And then, out of nowhere, I had a revelation, and the floor disappeared from under me, and I was standing on nothing. (290-291)

Oskar and Abby re-touch one another in a purely meta-ethical moment: two sets of lips signified in two scenes, each imploring the other for a kiss that ends instead in a touch, a

photographic touch and a material touch, respectively. Since Abby will not grant the kiss during their first meeting (a fact Oskar reminds us of right before they meet again eight months later), Oskar instead asks for and succeeds in taking a photograph, an innovative form of demonstrating a hospitable interaction *in-side* their difference. This photograph disallows the capacity for the non-kiss to wholly undercut their encounter, and it also allows for the occurrence of a second engagement, a re-touching, a moment that will eventually lead Oskar to finding a sense of disclosure on his journey, a sojourn both physical and metaphysical, a dual arrangement echoed by the co-pact of the kissing bi-touch. So, barred by cultural, gendered, and age-based norms, the photograph of Abby (Figure 6) is still “more truthful,” as Oskar says amidst their first conference, for he shares his representation with *us*; but how is it that no *face* implies a fidelity, a universality, and a uniformity?

Such a ‘facing facelessness’ immediately evokes conceptions of the Levinasian face that we saw in both Chapters One and Two, for *the* face, as we recall, is not a physiologically human construct but something *else*. Phillippe Crignon exclaims in an essay on Levinas and the Image that “we should not exclude the possibility that the representation of the face, and, in its wake, perhaps all figuration, participates in a certain kind of violence or an impulsive wounding” (104). Such a reading of Levinas’s ideas in *Totality and Infinity* correspond quite well, it seems, to the traumatic engagements initiated by Oskar with the various Black characters throughout the novel, especially with Abby—we can still have representation, a figured imagistic simulation, that withstands a violent interaction; Abby’s portrait does this. “This is why Levinas can add: ‘in this sense one can say that the face is not ‘seen’” (103), as Crignon recalls Levinas’s interview from *Ethics and Infinity*. Thus, Oskar’s portrait of Abby’s face, of his ‘facingness’ *to* her

remains honest and truthful as her own alterity remains responsibly intact, even after a touching (in all 'senses' of that word) encounter.

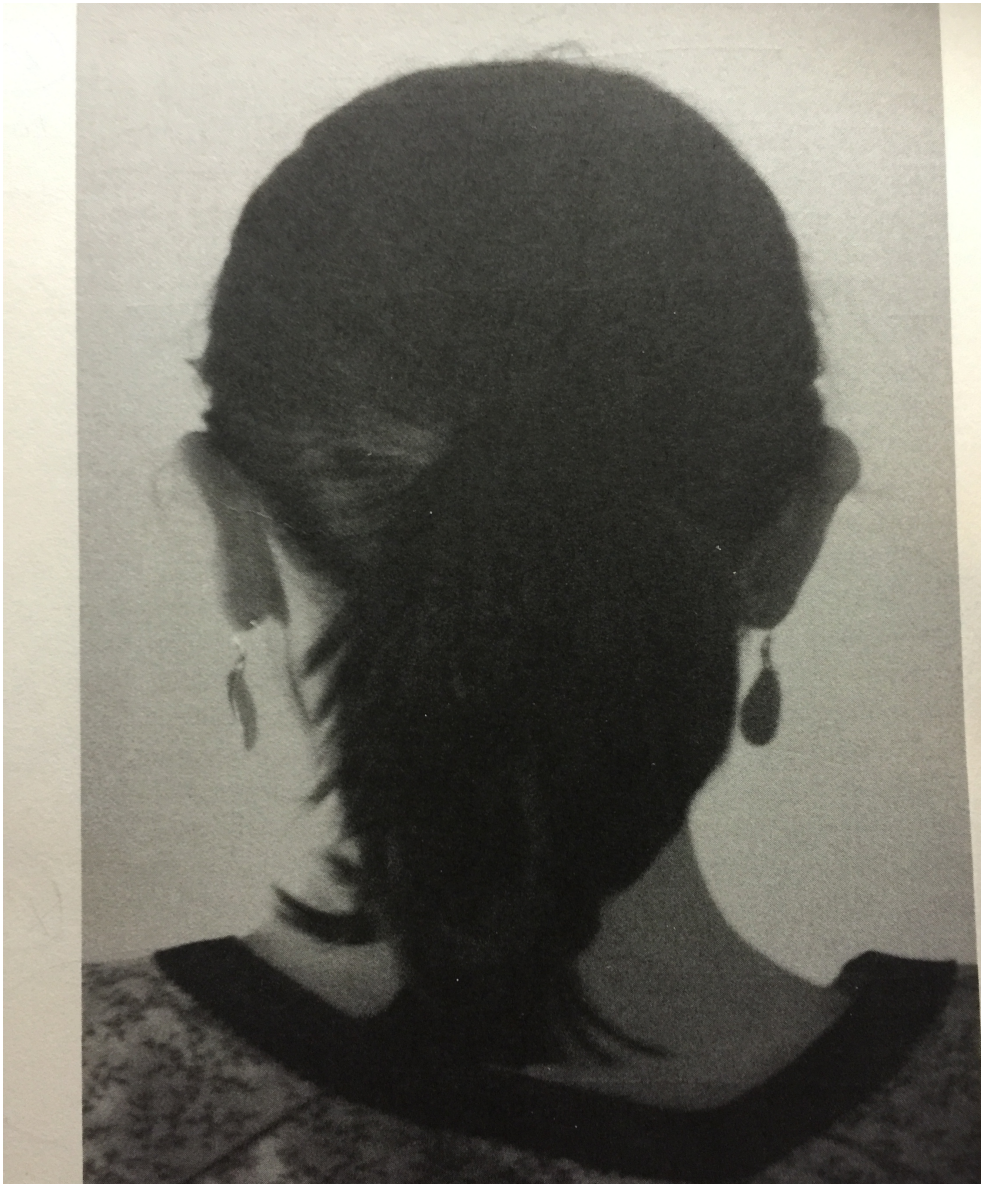


Figure 6--Portrait of Abby Black



For Irigaray, the face is both and neither intangible and tangible for the touch is always already there—as flesh, as idea—on the return from an experience with the Other. In “The Fecundity of the Caress,” Irigaray’s pivotal essay from *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, she converses with portions of Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity* and his notion of touch<sup>51</sup>, eventually positing a series of rhetorical queries around the “mystery of the touch,” asking what to do if entities, in their nocturnal<sup>52</sup> temporalizing (desirous memorializing) of touch, are left facing a facelessness? “Without a face? The face is swallowed up by the nocturnal experience of touching, touching self and other, re-touching” (191). Again, the face is ancillary to the touch, for the caress can come in either lightness or darkness. Irigaray continues in “The Fecundity of the Caress:” “spelled out in images and photographs, a face loses the mobility of its expressions, the perpetual unfolding and becoming of the living being” (192). So, in returning to Oskar’s “more truthful” portrait of Abby above: his capturing of her *non-face*—the back of her head, the

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<sup>51</sup> Dave Boothroyd advances a solid thesis in which he claims that Irigaray’s “Fecundity” essay is something intertextual, something meta-ethical it seems, and that “it is helpful to think of Irigaray’s reading of Levinas as a kind of readerly embrace, an encounter in which the irreducibility of sexual difference comes to the fore” (40). Boothroyd is arguing in the vein of something that my own project revisits throughout all its chapters: that these thinkers do often stage a “literary performance” (40) amongst themselves in order to demonstrate the ethical and work ethically via textual practice; however, my exploratory addendums sprout off of this as to not ignore the instantiation of *phototextual* contributions as well.

<sup>52</sup> As often is the case in her lyrical expositions, Irigaray’s use of a word is multi-faceted. “Nocturnal” touching as a metaphor for the intimate sort of touch occurring ‘behind closed doors,’ so to speak, but also nocturnal in the sense of the *difference* to the *lightness* of disclosure, of a darkness found in the temporalizing of the flesh via memory. This light/dark binary is something that Derrida also implements in many places throughout *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, also especially in his own reading of Levinas’s touch in *Totality and Infinity*. Derrida recalls Levinas’s notation of the “obscure light coming from beyond the face” and that “the caress, in Levinas’s analyses, is unsettling for all that is ordered in keeping with the face, which is to say almost everything” (79). In other words, for Derrida (and Irigaray), the face maintains a large significance, or course, but it is not something that ‘overpowers’ the primordially of touch and the caress.

*trace* of her face—is representative of the truth that even a metaphysical rendition of the Levinasian qua Irigarayan face takes an subsidiary approach to the numinous caress of touch. Irigaray works towards a succinct closure on the matter:

the face, or at least a certain conception, idea, or representation of it, can be swallowed up in the act of love. A new birth, which undoes and remakes contemplation by returning to the source of all the senses—the sense of touch. (192)

Oskar recognizes such a truth and his making of a photograph showing the lack of a physical face in Abby reifies this concept. The image reminds him, and anyone else who views the photograph, that the experiences of all their sensual touches, now just a black and white figure of temporal tracing, once existed “in a world where the look itself remain[ed] tactile—open to the light” (Irigaray 185). Touching a look, a gaze, and the illumination it bears forth.

What else do Foer’s important Oskar-Abby passages tell us about the enriching possibilities of the phototextual exchange? The moments of shared silence, of a co-silence: “She didn’t say anything...Then I was the silent one” (99); *these* are the balanced words narrated by Oskar during his first meeting with Abby Black. As Jean Baudrillard reminds us in the “Objects in This Mirror” portion from *The Perfect Crime*, maybe the best of his many pieces on photography in its humility and succinctness:

the silence of photography, one of its most precious qualities, unlike the cinema, TV or advertisements, on which you always have to impose a silence—unsuccessfully...silence of the image which requires (or should require!) no commentary...it is the only way of moving through the world in silence. (86)

Through an aphoristic style that will come to characterize his later work, Baudrillard is hereby offering up a display of meta-commentary, as the subject-at-hand is, after all, silence. And in the discourse between the photograph and its subject-objects, silence is of supreme importance. Indeed, as for Foer’s novel, the presence of silence will play an important role in all of Oskar’s intersubjective dealings. Or rather, silence is ‘part’ of an

important threshold on pathway towards the Other, “silence is the speaking of this threshold” (5), as Irigaray says towards the opening of *Sharing the World*. Silence as an open doorway on the other-path, that is, the threshold that discloses itself between self and other—Irigaray opens this dialogue in *The Way of Love* (“there exist different worlds that require silence in order to say themselves” (15)), but it truly arcs by *Sharing the World*. Hence, I contend that Foer’s novel, with the Oskar-Abby scenes as exemplary, concretize this silence and find all around it a surrounding, nourishing phototextual touching as its tangible representation. And it is Irigaray who develops the importance of silence *in* the exchange—and of *the* silent exchange—when she moves from *The Way of Love* to *Sharing the World*, thoughts that display an alignment to the pronounced consequences inherent in the phototextual aspects of Foer’s novel. In her article on the “traumatic iconicity” (an intriguing analogism for sure) in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, Philippe Codde concludes with these final lines, contextually placed within the notion that only pictures can work-towards traumatic healing: “at moments like these, a novel that seems to be extremely loud, suddenly becomes incredibly close, as its boisterous voice is reduced to a silent, touching whisper” (251). While Codde does not at all explicitly link Foer’s silences to the nexus of any of Irigaray’s ethical writings, what such words point to is the intimacy that the novel shares with its readers, while also meta-narrating on an intimacy shared *with-in* by its touching characters encountering each other via a visuality rooted in trauma.

Relatedly, Irigaray’s ‘touching whisper’ (to borrow Codde’s taxonomy) in which a key element *is* also silence, the importance of a not-*speaking* that could co-exist alongside dialogue, and hence illuminating the presence of a discourse neither active *nor* passive, finds a dwelling in the phototextuality of Foer’s work. But here, quoted at some

length I realize, is Irigaray's important opening maneuver on silence, found near the beginning of *Sharing the World*:

Thus silence will no longer be that which has not yet come to language, that which is still lacking words or a sort of ineffability that does not merit interest from language. Silence is the speaking of this threshold. If this silence does not remain present and active, the whole of discourse loses its most important function: communicating and not merely transmitting information. Then dialogue becomes impossible. In no dialogue can everything be said, and it is recognizing the necessity of something unspeakable and its preservation that allows an exchange of words between two different subjects. It is thanks to silence that the other as other can exist or be, and the two be maintained. Relations between two different subjectivities cannot be set up starting from a shared common meaning, but rather from a silence, which each one agrees to respect in order to let the other be. Entering into communication requires the limits, always effective, of a unique discourse, access to a silence thanks to which another world can manifest itself and take place. (5)

Firstly, such a position departs from Heidegger, from Levinas, and even from some of Irigaray's own earlier thought in *The Way of Love*; these are all positions that encourage a kind of perpetual, 'un-silent' discourse designed to propagate an infinite activeness through language. I am reminded here, suddenly, of Derrida's poignant eulogy for Levinas (cited initially in this dissertation's Chapter One):

I cannot speak of interruption without recalling, like many among you, no doubt, the anxiety of interruption I could feel in Emmanuel Levinas when, on the telephone, for example, he seemed at each moment to fear being cut off, to fear the silence or disappearance, the "without-response," of the other...what happens when a great thinker becomes silent? (9)

Aside from recollections of the space of silence, of which much has already been said, Derrida's 'touching' anecdote also raises some intriguing ideas regarding telephone-based discourse. Later, in *On Touching*, Derrida speaks further about this idea: this relationship between "the tactile and vision, the eye that does not touch and the eye that touches, like a finger or lips. It is time to speak of the voice that touches—always at a distance, like the eye—and the telephonic caress" (112). Accordingly, such communicative exchanges via the telephone also serve as a highly important backbone

for Foer's plot: Oskar's fear of answering machines, because of his father's *silence* (his voice is cut off mid-sentence) captured on their family machine as he called home amidst the 9/11 attacks, serve as important metaphysical weigh stations for readerly concern regarding other-interaction over the course of the book. For Abby Black, too, experiences silence at the hands of Oskar's voice mail, a fact she reminds him off during the re-touching of their second encounter—for her voice is also ended mid-stream as we discover.

But in accounting for silence—that is, Irigaray's "unique discourse" above—I would assert that it allows for the phototextual to find a dwelling *with-in* ethical dialogue. Silence *is* space; silence 're-presents' a proximal distance. As an entirely tangible example, a silence in language exists when, say, two beings come together but do not speak the same dialect—this so called 'language barrier' existent in a cross-cultural exchange represents something of a palpable rendition of this concept. But moving outwardly, drifting more abstractly, different genders also speak different languages (this, of course, is the core in so much of Irigaray's canon), and thus the need, the *call*, for silence is even more appealing and more necessary. A separation of words, but not of body; the touch of silence, the silence in touching. Judith Still concludes that "silence is thus the temporalization of the threshold, a gap that cannot easily be stepped over, but not a chasm—for there can be an encounter" (46); and again, it is the phototextual that bridges such a gaping fissure.

Indeed, I am alleging that Oskar's photographs, his portraits *and* everything else he shoots (or *photocopies*)—such as the book-ending stills of the falling man falling up—are (visual) silence. But as a temporalized instant necessary in the discourse with the other as other, Oskar's "truthful" portraits of both Abby Black and, later, her husband William (Figure 7), these rearward-facing portraits illustrate the quiet *moment* Irigaray

dictates when “the other as other escapes my gaze” (126). This is not to say, of course, that Oskar’s verbosity is non-existent—his precociousness still very much engenders

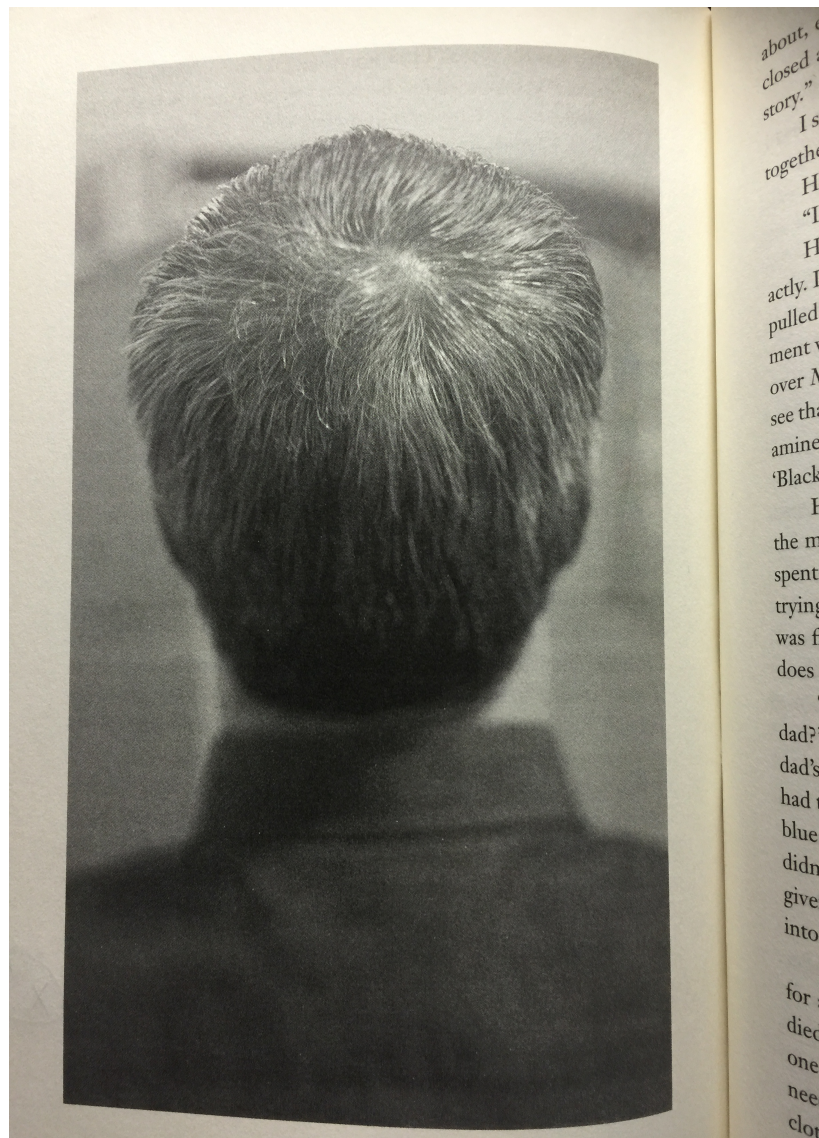


Figure 7--Portrait of William Black

dialogues profound and humorous—but that his encounters that culminate in these images *are* representations of a silent threshold. As novelist Teju Cole will say about the ‘characters’ in Richard Renaldi’s *Touching Strangers* images discussed below: “in the *silence* between his subjects, there’s a charge.” (8). Oskar’s interactions with William, who is at first a stranger, allow them both to travel outside their traumas through a phototextual silence that is yet electric, dynamic. As Aaron Mauro suggests in regards to Oskar’s encounters with William, “by trusting a confession to a stranger, Oskar moves beyond the uncertainty and fear of this new world toward a sense of unconditional trust for his neighbors” (604). Later in her same chapter, entitled “Distance in Nearness,” Irigaray continues: “I bend the other to my horizon and he, or she, loses their own existence, unless they escape my apprehension and disappear from my world” (126). William and Oskar find each other in the world, and build trust, moving from strangers to otherwise in this phototextual silence. Again, I think the photographs contained in the novel—which appear in meta-form in Oskar’s diary that he keeps—both Oskar’s original shots and those he takes from elsewhere, demonstrate this disappearance, this silence, in action, as well as . The sequence of fifteen full-page images of the falling man which Oskar reverses as to show the fall down altering now into a rising skyward and upward, ends with the figure completely effaced from sight—the very last page of the novel is of just the World Trade Center face, for the man has completely fallen up and away from any vision.

Irigaray concludes the “Distance in Nearness” section of *Sharing the World* by stating that “a logic that favours sight precludes coexistence and communication with the other as other...we do not see each other as such...the other is still and always to be discovered” (126). Discovered how? Through the silent touch. Sight is neither dangerous not inferior but it can impede an authentic coexistence in the threshold *if* touch

is unreservedly reduced and ignored therein. As Judith Still and Lisa Watrous have claimed (and even as Irigaray herself alluded to in *Key Writings*), *Sharing the World* acts as an extension of the thought brought forth in *The Way of Love* and Irigaray concludes that earlier work by recounting the need for a “visual touching:” “the relation with the other has forgotten what it owes to touching—among others a visual touching” (150). Thus is the fecundity of the visual caress, which favors both a separate and proximate distance, and where such a caress can be employed in the service of

preparing for an encounter cannot be reduced to covering the other with clothes, images, or speeches which render this other familiar to us, but requires finding gestures or words which will touch the other in his, or her, alterity. (151)

Such a touching must ‘honor’ both the self and the other. Just as we saw, albeit fleetingly, in my conclusion to Chapter Three regarding DeLillo’s own finale to *Mao II*, the shimmering, illuminating light *with-in* the touching process is a “touch which allows turning back into oneself, in the dwelling of an intimate light. But which also goes to encounter the other...overflowing one’s own world in order to taste another brightness” (174). So, too, just as in Foer’s first novel, the quite aptly named *Everything is Illuminated*, Foer’s second novel ends with the central character uncovering an illuminated closeness imbedded *in*, and *of*, a light-cleansed dwelling. Oskar’s reversed flipbook, when coincided with his assertions that such reversal would have meant that “we would have been safe” (Foer’s very final line, 326), according to Ilka Saal, “reminds us that...the family reunion at least suggests to us what such a return ‘home’ might feel like” (472). *We have returned, we are home.*

Finally, as for situating Foer’s novel within the realm of trauma theory, as countless critics have rightly done, I would suggest that in order to foster a moving-beyond of such a traumatic reading *in-to* an uncovering of the threshold of healing, we must fully account for Oskar’s co-creation of the phototext with those he meets as



manifesting such a soothing, restorative process. In an article on the “photographic history of 9/11” in the works of both DeLillo and Foer, Aaron Mauro insinuates that many critics of trauma theory misunderstand Oskar’s obsessions with representation: Laura Frost, for example, “argues that Oskar’s mourning is as static as the photos on which he fixates. The turn to photography...is a turn to an unproductive traumatized fixation on the past” (603). While Oskar’s image-making, and journey therein, does accurately comprise a central “fixated” structure of the narrative, such readings are in fact productive healing through his project of fostering co-interactive touchings with an Other, encounters that rise outward from the traces of a phototextual *seeing and saying* of touch. Yet, in order to substantiate all of the above claims vis-à-vis a more literary phototext like Foer’s novel, in turning now towards a completely visual phototextual endeavor, Richard Rinaldi’s somewhat contemporaneous *Touching Strangers* portraiture project, I hope to deepen and further enlighten this conversation regarding the closenesses that a phototextual touching can engender.

### Strangers That Touch

Aside from some cursory evaluations in various sections of *The New York Times*,<sup>53</sup> there has been little critical attention paid to the portraiture work of working

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<sup>53</sup> Anna Altman’s review of the *Touching Strangers* book from May of 2014, is probably one of the more insightful appraisals of the few that exist. In it, Altman posits that what makes Rinaldi’s photographs so intriguing is that, even knowing his strategy, the viewer can’t help fabricating a story around the subjects’ relationship. We weave narratives around them—who they are, the unlikely tenderness that might exist between strangers...Rinaldi helps us to see a family, despite ethnic *differences*, even when we know, intellectually, that they are not one...part of the allure of [his] photographs is their ability to evoke a world where boundaries do not exist.

Rinaldi is thus a storyteller, which others might argue is the mark of a skilled portraitist, but what makes his storytelling indeed quite captivating is the spatial co-existence that

photography Richard Renaldi at his Touching Strangers series. Novelist Teju Cole penned the introduction to the work, published in 2014, and reminds viewers what Renaldi's portraits should alert us to:

it brings us a reconsideration of the mystery of touch. Of the five traditional senses, touch is the only one that is reflexive: one can look without being seen, and hear without being heard, but to touch is to be touched. It is a sense that goes both ways: the sensitivity of one's skin responds to and is responded to by the sensitivity of other people's skin...there is something irreducible about the effect of touching another human being, or witnessing such contact. We see the results on the faces of the subjects of these photographs...some transformative magic takes place. (9)

Cole's words ring with pertinence for illustrating the significance of touch as the premier ethical sense: touch goes *both* ways. Additionally, Cole has not discounted how such images *touch* the viewer: hence the double-handed assertion of the title: strangers touching each other and us touching them as well (and *being* touched by them). And as I alluded to at the top of this chapter, the subjects in Renaldi's portraits—at first strangers to each other—often felt that by the end of the process they were much less so, they were something else, something *closer*. They feel like they knew each other—some sort of knowledge had been obtained in the proximity before they each found distance once again; and so many of the resulting images illustrate the trace of this familiarity. Aside from the formalistic concept that Renaldi's medium is solely visual iconography while Foer's is chiefly textual with supplemental imagery, how do both phototextual endeavors move beyond such formalisms to demonstrate the metaphysical closeness of touching and the ethical power for going beyond just a traumatic restoration? What can Renaldi's work, when co-viewed, or *co-touched*, with Foer's *teach* us about the fecundity of the

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occurs between the subjects in his imagined, imagistic novellas. Yet, even if the narratives he creates align to fiction, the touching-ness therein is purely, truthfully real.

figural? And in, perhaps, a heavy-handed meta-ethical push: what are the proximities-in-differences *between* the work of each artist?

Firstly, Rinaldi's co-portraits, unlike Oskar's peopled images, consist of a clear *facingness*, at least in the literal sense—these intersubjective entities are *looking*, either at the camera or at each other (or both). These co-portraits differ too in that they are markedly honoring the other as other in the most discernible 'sense,' and we, the viewers, see the traces of this discovery, are implicated in it. In the second chapter of *Sharing the World*, "At the Crossroads—the Encounter," Irigaray speaks of the Event, the "something" that has happened in the encounter between humans: a "soul has been born, brought forth by two others. There are now three living beings for whom we lack the ways of approaching (31). Such a triangularization draws back, perhaps, to Avedon and Powers's triplicated structures discussed in Chapter Two and also will project us forward shortly to the concluding Chapter Six and Ariella Azoulay's "civil contract of photography" that, by her definition, involves a triumvirate of ethical arrangement: a photographer, a subject, and a viewer all working in tandem to bring an image outwardly forth, responsibly and with meaning. Consequently, in returning to Irigaray's third being, this triangularized assembly could be perceived potentially in two ways in the context of Rinaldi's portraits: a) either the two beings are the pair of subjects in the photo, and Rinaldi himself is the third being birthed from witnessing their touching, or b) the photographed subjects subsist as a singular-yet-plural (per Jean-Luc Nancy) entity, with Rinaldi as the second force, and this drawn-out third soul via such an encounter is us as viewer, for only when these images are viewed and engaged with do they illuminate with their disclosing light; in other words: unviewed photographs do nothing for/to a viewer.

I am more concerned with this second 'option,' especially since it clusters the photographed subjects enough as to assign them to a singularized position yet still

displayed is their respective, respected differences. And Rinaldi acknowledges and respects so much difference throughout the course of his collected images: gendered, sexual, racial, disabled, age, and religious (we can only garner these particular differences, of course, when certain manners of religious-tied dress are present: there is a Hasidic Jewish man in one shot and another shot a Muslim woman wearing a hijab headscarf; relatedly there is a shot of two naked strangers—a man and a woman—on a nude beach, thus demonstrating a proximal difference even when clothes are totally absent!). Immediately, we witness some crossover to Foer's novel, especially in the portraits involving gendered difference, or more noticeably—only because Renaldi employs such a pairing much less often—an age-related difference between the two subjects. But such comparative matters between photograph and novel are really only superficial, are they not? Only by delving even more intensely into Irigaray's ethical writings can we see how Renaldi's portraits bolster the metaphysical clout of the touch and therefore its larger repercussions for the modeling of a reading and a living ethically, a paradigmatic arrangement arising out of such conceptual *and* material contact.

In *Sharing the World*, Irigaray advocates that: "insofar as we recognize that we are remote from one another, we can begin to come near. This approach cannot be merely spatial, at least in the sense of a physical closeness" (7). Such a primary device, here pared down into something very straightforward, has been the mainstay of Irigaray's ethical work for some time: a closeness which heeds the existence of difference, a difference based in the seeking of proximity. And as she notes, physical immediacy is a necessary piece for the meta-physical approach, but it is not the sole quantity. So, how else does one 'get there,' get *in-to* this co-opening with the Other that is both close *and* respectful of a difference, as to not force the Other into a mold of the same Self? In *The Way of Love*, amidst all the lyrical thought, Irigaray does spell out, over the course of the

work, a logical progression of four 'spaces'<sup>54</sup> (my naming of her processes) for achieving such 'results;' and how do Renaldi's (and Foer's) works *re-present* such a progression?

Irigaray's first space involves a descending into oneself—this leads to a being-on-the-way, this initial step primes the Self, so to speak, for the metaphysical path laden with the various thresholds of truths regarding the Other. But these early paths are darkly epistemological, clouded by information: coded speech, varied subjectifications; it is thus difficult to safeguard oneself against these things that have not even cleared the proximal horizon to one, to the other. But in being-with-the-other, knowing (of) their differences, both in languages and in silences (silences: something we have already explored above in light of Foer's novel), we can begin to clear the path in this meeting—*through the silent touch of phototextual poetics*—and work towards finding that illuminated opening in the trees: this all composes the second space. In the third space, the Self returns from the sharing with the Other, returns therefore authentically with-in themselves, and with-in the other, and in the vast recognized difference(s). Elsewhere, in the "The Fecundity of the Caress" essay, Irigaray emphasizes that: "before orality comes to be, touch is already in existence. No nourishment can compensate for the grace or work of touching. Touch makes it possible to wait, to gather strength, so that the other will return to caress" (187);

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<sup>54</sup> As a structural side note, Irigaray builds *Sharing the World* similarly: a four-parted progression that first demands that one be truthful and faithful to themselves before even attempting a journey down the path towards the other; the beginning of such a journey is the next 'phase.' The eventual encounter at the crossroads is part three, and the return journey back to respective dwellings, though co-shared in a co-world—this leads *towards* a closure (again, an (en)closure), a closeness (fourth 'part'). My point in notating her organizational methods is, I think, to stress the ethical circularity inherent to such a flow. Of course, the *said* demands that language is something of a 'necessary evil,' that it is all that we have to work with (for the moment) for engaging with one another. Also, such a progressive, logical method of literary construction is a meta-ethical way of demonstrating this while still allowing for a re-reading as the fourth levels are never fully "finalized," they only *gesture towards* it, to be revisited again and again. This is maybe why the very first clause of *Sharing the World* reads as follows: "the path towards the other is first a path towards the infinite" (1).

in other words, each entity returns to themselves after the encounter at the crossroads in hopes for a future meeting once more—such hope allows for the final threshold to open. And such optimism stresses why touch is *a priori*, why it could even be considered pre-phenomenological. Lastly, in the fourth and final space, in the shimmering clearing, a permanent dwelling can be built: we can transcend temporary, temporal concepts of language, of representation, we can Be. Such Being involves the preserving of one's memory as well as presenting to the Other: time does not 'freeze' as much as eternally reflect, but operates temporally and simultaneously. Of course, this fourth space is an always-already ongoing process, a sojourn-in-action, perpetually.

Thusly, the touch and caress of all sensual forms of representation, especially the visual, are *essentially primordial* for being-on-the-way to this phase of closure, the way of love *towards* a sharing of the world. Oskar's phototextually-based journeys and, now, Renaldi's portraiture work align to such a trace, to the ambient strides that generate and encourage such fidelity to the touching relationship.

Derrida opens *On Touching* with, it seems, a characteristically circular and interrogative exploration on this notion of visual touching; he asks in the section, appropriately titled "When our eyes touch..." if:

let's see, can eyes manage to touch, first of all, to press together like lips...[and] if two gazes look into each other's eyes, can one then say that they are touching? Are they coming into contact—the one with the other? (2)

Lips, the kiss, the caress of visual touching. Oskar and Abby's interactions certainly teased out these ideas in the earlier subsection. So, what about the arresting portrait by Renaldi (Figure 8), entitled "Ekeabong and Andrew, Venice, California, 2013?" Is this not serving as a subsidiary demonstration, as a purely visual representation on the visibility



Figure 8--Portrait of Ekeabong and Andrew

of touching caress? The photograph's title only names the participants, as well as the year and geographic location of the encounter. The background is non-distracting and simple yet brightly yellow and illuminating. But we see exposed flesh; we see a sensual touching of hands and of noses (and, we might correspondingly presume, the existent 'touch' of smell). We see a *co-caress*—the same mutuality Cole reads in Renaldi's photographs—and we also see what Irigaray describes in her compendium, *Key Writings*:

the caress is an awakening to intersubjectivity, to a touching between us which is neither passive nor active; it is an awakening of gestures, or perceptions which are at the same time acts, intentions, emotions. This does not mean that they are ambiguous but, rather, that they are attentive to the one who touches and the one who is touched, to the two subjects who touch each other. (20)

Ekeabong's hand on Andrew's face, Andrew's hand on Ekeabong's hip. Her forearm on his bared chest, her nose and lips grazing his cheek, or his cheek grazing her nose, his chest pressing against her forearm—the touching is inherently a *co-touching*. Her closing eyes, his own concentrated stare. These are the formal properties—these are the things of the *studium*, if we want to return to our Barthes—work together to the still-present *punctum* that these two were strangers minutes before the captured trace.

Furthermore, what about this accompanying shot (Figure 9), entitled “LeAsia and Rebecca, New York, New York, 2013?” What makes this particular image stand out among Renaldi's collection is that this is one of the few portraits where *both* the subjects actually gaze at one another, instead of at Renaldi, his camera, and ultimately us as collective viewer. Here we have a *different* form of the principles of Derrida qua Irigaray playing out: the meeting of looks, of eyes, of touching both physically, visually, and otherwise—a nearness of body, of similar gendered bodies yet there remains a clarity of racial and age-based difference. A fleetingness, a singular-yet-plural temporal instant nestled *with-in* silent discourse. Derrida continues in his opening in *On Touching*:





Figure 9--Portrait of LeAsia and Rebecca

But precisely, when my gaze meets yours, I see *both* your gaze *and* your eyes, love in fascination—and your eyes are not only seeing but also visible. And since they are *visible* (things or objects in the world) as much as *seeing* (at the origin of the world), I could precisely touch them, with my fingers, lips or even eyes, lashes and lids, by approaching you if I dared come near to you in this way, if I one day dared. (3)

Oskar's moment with Abby Black turned the narrative directionally when he dared to approach in closeness, there is a touching first of photographs, of eyes, then skin, then immortalized all by his taking of her portrait (albeit from behind). With LeAsia and Rebecca, there is something quite similar happening: the boldness of a disrespectful approach circumvented by the purely multi-sensual touching. Additionally, Irigaray asserts that:

to touch one another in intersubjectivity, it is necessary that two subjects agree to the relationship and that the possibility to consent exists. Each must have the opportunity to be a concrete, corporeal, and sexuate subject. (20)

As far as the biographical evidence shows, we can ascertain that Renaldi is not exerting any sort of force in obtaining and positioning his subjects, and he actually states how so much of his time is often spent cajoling subjects because of their perceived existence of so many barriers.<sup>55</sup> Of course, Renaldi's grand point is that these barriers are mere societal constructs and that the differences between individuals can still exist simultaneously to and respectful of a closeness founded in touching. Such an idea reiterates Irigaray's amalgamation of a metaphysical and phenomenological comprehension of touch with something very material—Oskar's interactions with the various Blacks, especially Abby and William, correspond to such a devoutly fresh, ethical perspective on touch, and Renaldi's portraits achieve the same ends albeit with the

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<sup>55</sup> See John Leland's piece from *The New York Times*, July 5 2013. Leland follows Renaldi around during a day of shooting, documenting the creation of one specific portrait of an Orthodox Jewish man, a Yeshiva student, who could not touch a woman for the photograph because of his beliefs.

opposite side of the same phototextual coin; and it is such phototextual avenues that help engender such a space for this new touch to vibrantly promulgate.

### Co-Creating the Visual Caress

Although not containing elements from the later book *Sharing the World*, Luce Irigaray's self-selected works comprised of *Key Writings* still accurately represent her larger oeuvre of thought. In it, she claims regarding her pivotal philosophy of the touch, of the caress, that:

the caress is a gesture-word which goes beyond the horizon or the distance of intimacy with the self. This is true for the one who is caressed and touched, for the one who is approached within the sphere of their incarnation, but it is also true for the one who caresses, for the one who touches and accepts distancing oneself from the self through this gesture. (20)

The caress is indeed the apex of ethical touching for a shared co-agreement between entities stands as firmly crucial; touch cannot be merely a one-sided affair of either the Self or the Other as other. In this chapter, I proposed that phototextual caress *is* such a 'gesture-word' for its ability to move outside and past the inauthenticity of the self-centered existence.

In *The Way of Love*, I already mentioned how Irigaray speaks of a four-stepped process towards an authentic being-with-the-other based in the accumulated proximal distance *learned* on the pathway of touch. As for Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, the character Oskar's exploratory touches, physical, linguistic, *and* visual *touchings*, lead to a being-on-the-way with an Other in this first aforementioned space. In the "Sharing of Speech" chapter corresponding to this first sited threshold, Irigaray claims that "to say that the heart of proximity belongs to speech comes down to having already removed it from its carnal touching" (33). Oskar's active saying, and subsequent clarifications, *speak to* the importance of understanding the Self

preceding the understanding of the Other; and his photographs engender such an active discussion that brings those involved together; and this is rendered more meta-ethically intriguing in that fact that the clarifications so speak of loving the image, loving the representational power of the image, shared ethically with the reader as well no less, as we saw with his discussions of the elephant photograph, or his requests to take pictures of Abby. Speech is not a negation or minimization of the touch, but it is certainly primordial to it.

Foer's novel is so often read under the light of post-9/11 trauma theory—and this is certainly an appropriate critical node for its analysis. However, others like Lewis Gleich in his article “Ethics in the Wake of the Image,” regard Foer's text as belonging to a vital group of post-9/11 American novels that

show how literature can act as a counterforce to the spectacle by providing a space where characters and narrators respond to images with sustained dialogue rather than passive spectatorship [and such] accounts of cinema and photography...reveal how images themselves can be used to subvert or attenuate the force of the spectacle [and] provide readers with a space for beginning to think about an ethics that can respond to the aesthetics of an age dominated by images. (163)

While Gleich does offer a significant understanding of Foer's novel (alongside important readings of somewhat similar novels by DeLillo and Auster too), he neglects to develop that how for Oskar the “sustained dialogue” actually exists *with* his creation of images themselves, images created with *others*—and how such images work with healing of trauma—rather than just asking “what do we think we're going to learn with each repeated viewing of the same image?” (170). In other words, Gleich's concern lies with how Foer's Oskar ethically engages with already-existent imagery—or, in product over process, maybe—rather than how Oskar's co-forgings of a phototextual discourse act as an *a priori* ethical device here.

For the Irigaray writing throughout *The Way of Love*, in such an ethical encountering that grows out

from the interaction between the subjective and the objective of two worlds, a third arises...generated thanks to the withdrawal imposed by difference. The constitution of such a place, always becoming... without submitting it to a past plenitude or an ideal future. (9)

Genuine phototextual dialogue *appears* in the material trace, the instant, the tangible image resulting from such co-discovery between the touch of a Self to/by/for an Other: this is the totalizing *seen* (or, *said*); but as Irigaray asserts above, the working-towards to such a finalized instant, born from difference, is *always becoming*, the process of being-with-the-other is an on-going, ever-occurring *pathway*. And on this path, thresholds open and the irruptive *evental* instants captured therein merely diverge the path, thus still allowing for an always-active conversation nurtured throughout the (co-)journey by the caress of phototextual endeavors with the Other. Such is the manner that Irigaray closes out *Sharing the World*; the penultimate page speaks to significance of co-creating art with the Other:

The existence of the total and always already differentiated real that we are can be approached, affirmed, and expressed to the other through art. Not only through the work of art that we create outside of ourselves, but the one that we can become by transforming, at each moment, our natural immediacy into a way of being likely to exchange with the other. (135)

Oskar's photographic undertakings and Renaldi's portraits—these artistic expressions do not happen alone, there is *always* a process of co-creation occurring: and this is what can be taken away from uniting the fictional and non-fictional (and/or “the always already differentiated real?”) phototexts of these artists alongside the ethical thinking of Irigaray, Derrida, and others. With his pictures *and* his words, Oskar's closeness to the other characters brings *us* closer to an understanding of an ethical becoming-through-photography. Relatedly, Renaldi's portraits, his representational re-presentations of this

same bi-lateral artistic phototextual *becoming*, give us a more fully 'realized' image of these beings and ourselves too. For as Irigaray herself states on the closing page of *Sharing the World*: "this art is thus the mediation necessary for constructing together a shareable world" (136). Obviously, Irigaray's texts do not reference either Foer or Rinaldi, but the artistic efforts of those latter two find a snug space in such a peaceable realm.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion: Through the Lens, or, The New Traces of *Seeing*

“Every photographed object is merely the trace left by the disappearance of everything else”

-Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*

“The singular gaze enabled by photography...also exists—always and only—within a plurality. The spectator activating this gaze views the photograph and recognizes instantly that what is inscribed in it and discernible in it are the products of plurality—the plural participants in the act of photography (the photographer, the photographed person, and the spectator)...[the civil gaze] cannot consent to any attempt to rule the visible while seeking to abolish the space of plurality.”

-Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*

For early Levinas, the infinite Saying/Seeing, rather than the totalizing forms of the ontological Said/Seen, occur as the modus for the ethical exchange of discourse, even if the latter pairing is something constitutive of a Being that must be thematized. Later on, Jean-Luc Nancy in *Being Singular Plural* approaches a phrasing of this same metaphysical dilemma slightly differently: “Being is *said* in many ways. But to say it once more, according to the ‘with,’ the ‘also,’...the singularity of Being is its plural” (38). In other words, *both* parts—the singular, the plural—make up the ethical being of all entities: “the multiplicity of the said (that is, of the sayings) belongs to Being as its constitution. Thus rather than focusing on which is “first philosophy,” and/or whether an ontological fortitude owes its resilience of thought to an ethical foundation, Nancy is more concerned with advancing the notion that being, singularity, and multiplicity all exist at once, all the time, and in full equality—this is the exquisiteness of his title, *Being Singular Plural*, punctuation-less and multi-modal in meaning. Thusly, I attempt to re-corroborate the

“fragmented pluralism” I purported to initiate in Chapter One, and to which hopefully sustained itself throughout the entirety of this study.

Perhaps it is echoes of such thought that appear in my own project. My own project aimed to consider and advance the argument that in crucial postmodern American phototexts, what is often experienced as a combative binary of the Saying ‘versus’ the Said is here actually more of a paradoxical intertwining: these texts exist as both a Saying *and* a Said (as a Seeing *and* a Seen). Furthermore, I argued that the phototexts of this present study engage with the Other in the hopeful exchange via photo-ethical transcendence, and that a veritable “non-in-difference” that *speaks* to proximal difference grants an *indifference* towards/of any discrepancy. An ethical transcendental *possibility* uncovered on the phototextual path, *through* such various thresholds: 1) the understanding of the aforementioned unity of a seen and seeing dynamic, but also 2) the (un)masked meaning of the face-to-face encounter, 3) the substitutive and hospitable becoming-hostage towards the Other as other, 4) the truth-handling of an eventual rupture with the fidelity of love, and 5) the paramount proximity of the touching encounter. I presented this pluralized variety of metaphysical dialogues by exploring how the phototext serves as the premier methodology for validating and, more importantly, continuing to engage in the discussion in the postmodern American epoch.

Now, in the opening paragraph on the opening page of *On Photography*, Susan Sontag posits this argument: “in teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing” (3). Sontag’s 1977 exposition is canonical, generating spectra of responses over the decades since, including even her own in *Regarding the Pain of Others*. But what *does* it mean that photography is *an ethics of seeing*? Ariella Azoulay exhibits some rightful misgivings on



Sontag's aestheticizing of photography, even if the former late critic does employ the term "ethics," Azoulay questions the 'grammar' inherent to Sontag's 'seeing ethics.' Instead of seeing, photography should involve a "looking," Azoulay argues, and such an involvement is in a newfound responsibility of the spectator of the interactions between photographer and photographed. Myself, while I agree with Azoulay's overall assessment here of Sontag's understandings, I still find great value in both the ideas of seeing *and* looking, of a pluralizing of such *ethical viewings*. While certainly not the solitary standard, Azoulay does represent a possible *future* of a new ethical discourse on photography—but I think, too, that the thinkers examined throughout this study, when studied with-in and with-out their respective worlds and words of thought, can offer much into how we can all engage with the phototext of our contemporary epoch—this is the stirring prospect of the conversation.

Yet before speaking of the new, of 'the future,' in my related conception of it anyhow, maybe we should recede somewhat to examine 'the past.' All the way to the beginning, thus ending with the starting point: what are we to make of the *title* of my whole project? Certainly, the nods to Irigaray qua Levinas seem clear in the idea of fecundity, and I owe much to that ethical discourse which propagates amidst the infinitude of the loving co-existence *for* the Other *as* other. Now with the word "figural," perhaps the path grows thornier, especially in relation to the concept of 'discourse'—so, what *is* the figural and *how* does its encountering and its engendered developments arouse the absolutely ethical, especially in light of the ever-changing development of The Image, of The Photograph? This study has almost all but avoided conjuring Jean-Francois Lyotard's *Discours, figure*, or D.N. Rodowick's *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy After the New Media*. Why? After all, Rodowick *does* offer some fairly clear

delineations for his understanding of the figural, what it is, what it means, and what it does. Early on in his Preface, he states that:

the concept of the figural as presented in this book is...as a semiotic theory that comprehends what the image becomes when freed from the opposition of word to image; as a social theory that contests, through a deconstruction of the aesthetic, the dominance of art...and finally as a theory of power that unlocks the figural as a historical image...wherein the spatial and temporal parameters of contemporary collective life can be read as they are recognized by the new images and new communications technologies. (x-xi)

Did not my own study take as two of its several key theorists Jacques Derrida and Simon Critchley, interlocutors in the perpetual dialogue disclosing the deconstructionist bent inherent to ethical philosophy? Even Emmanuel Levinas is often viewed as something of a 'proto-deconstructionist,' especially when taking into account his thoughts regarding art and aesthetics, ideas most relevant here to my twilight reference of Rodowick's work. But let us return more closely to Rodowick's ideas of the figural above: his separation of the word/image binary is of some importance, as is his latter chapters interrogating the situationality of a dawning twenty-first century collectivity (his 2001 book almost seems like ancient history now, too, no?)—both of these notions have some kind of undercurrent throughout the entirety of my own work. For him, the figural *represents* the location where linguistic and plastic representation ceases to work in an opposition—such a proximity of thought implies an ethical understanding in its recognition of difference, as well as, perhaps, its postmodern proclivity for the paradox. However, Rodowick's extended concern for how such spatial sites may modify under temporal and technological advancement find much less fastening to the timelessness of the pluralistic ethical paradigm I have advanced over my own chapters. Indeed, Rodowick's seeming unease of the haziness of public versus private spaces—and the inappropriately different power dynamics such a shift may provoke—rouse other writers evoked in my study too, most notably Zizek and Foer, in the theoretical and literary senses, respectively.

Again, to put it differently, while Rodowick builds out from Lyotard's destabilizing of the discourse/figure relationship, Rodowick's own conclusions look towards a future, a new century and a technological landscape that could reduce the plane to either one of an informational inequality or that granting advanced accessibility for all and thus 'modernizing' Benjamin's theories decades earlier in his famous essay on the reproducibility of art. Moreover, by the end of his book (published in 2001), Rodowick posits "whether we have indeed entered a new historical era, fueled by the increasing predominance of digital technologies and computer-mediated communications" and inquires as to "how is our experience of collectivity changing" (xv-xvi). Certainly, this is not meant to be some sort of critical response or refutation of Rodowick—far from it—I just merely wish to show how creating such marked boundaries based in technological obsolescence destabilizes the more prevailingly timeless ethical concern, even if it uses the same basic principles Rodowick employs within his writings. The "uncertain Utopia" of Rodowick's final chapter does not have to be so uncertain if we return to see how certain American phototexts engage with and encourage an authentic ethical environment.

Thus, my own focus is something much more essential, something far more grounded—perhaps, even rudimentarily so, to some—in a primordial essentiality, in a favoring of a metaphysical 'system' that operates more unassumingly outside the confines of finitude. Yes, the camera as apparatus, and its resultant photograph, are products of (and continue to be so) technological innovation. And yes, the future of the image could potentially be changing at an alarming rate, but does not a return to the originary and basic first philosophy of ethics presuppose a more adequate reaction to such hyper-medial shifting? To be sure, I raise a lot of questions here, and throughout the earlier chapters as well. But in such a mode of query, maybe there lies a humbler

drive. An instance where seeking a loving fidelity to the eventual wave felt in even the everydayness in Other-encountering takes a sort of precedence over larger-scale delineations regarding the fate of this so called new media and its subsequent imagistic redefinings. Certainly, this is not to say that the photographic text is unimportant. Quite the contrary: the phototext is *the* premier conduit for such Other-encounterings.

So, again, where is all of this conversation heading now? Towards the end of the last chapter, I really only made the most covert of reference to the ideas of public versus private by overtly using Foer's 9/11 novel and Renaldi's street-based, stranger-based portraiture. Such ideas of how the Self can relate to the Other through a co-existent trauma-healing: "while acknowledging differences, traumatic solidarity is grounded primarily in similarities" (Mullins 300). Yet, has the dialogue on the photographic image has shifted irreversibly since 9/11? Indeed, the discourse now inevitably raises matters of the how the spectacle is received and engaged with across public and private spaces—as well as a new Foucauldian understanding of an observed surveillance inside such blurred public/private sites. Has the role and reception of the image altered since the media took the events of 9/11 "hostage" through an exploitation of images, as Jean Baudrillard—to some *the* postmodern seer—exclaimed in *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays* (qtd. in Gleich 161)? Finally, has the occurrence of 9/11 thrust us deeper into this public 'versus' private spatial conflation, per Zizek's account in his conclusion of *Event*:

The street is an intensely private place and seemingly the words public and private make no sense. In short, being in a public space does not entail only being together with unknown people—in moving among them, I am still within my private space, engaged in no interaction with or recognition of them. In order to count as public, the space of my co-existence and interaction with others (or the lack of it) has to be covered by security cameras. (156)

Does Foer's Oskar represent an example of this inversion of terms by his taking of a public tragedy into the privacy of others' grief (*alongside* his) and where he (co)creates phototextual narratives? Does DeLillo's Brita also represent this when she suddenly removes the mask of Rashid's son (a move that parallels her disarming of Bill and his portrait-taking) and taking his portrait for her German newspaper? Or what about Powers's version of the portraitist August Sander engaging with three country farmers, or even his team of virtual artists and programmers; are not both groups engaged in creating a fully interactive and immersive image for public consumption?

For what do the *core* of Zizek's observations state here: that the camera engenders the ethical experience itself, no? Moreover, he asserts that the Event of the changing of the private/public binary itself has rendered a redefining, a "diseventualization," as Zizek calls it; and is this dismantling, or re-evaluating, of the evental status 'good' or 'bad?' Regardless, the definitions of private and public space—*that is, of the corresponding spaces belonging to the Self and the Other*—have upended, and therefore too has our manner of co-existing with others. And such shifts, despite their (re)classifications, are all *seen* through the lenses of an ever-growing network of surveilling cameras. If this is the fate of not only the photographic Image but of Other-interactions in a perpetually increasing electronic-based communicative atmosphere, how can *all* parties involved engage with one another responsibly and *civilly* amongst evental irruption? Therefore, does Ariella Azoulay's photo-ethical paradigm represent the location of a contemporaneous understanding? Perhaps returning to her framework can bring us just that much *closer* to closure.

Over the courses of both *The Civil Contract of Photography* and *Civil Imagination: The Political Ontology of Photography*, Azoulay offers up her (somewhat litigious sounding) civil contract, the impression that speaks towards an idea of social

justice and the capabilities of/for equality imbued in photographic-ethical practices and which can subsequently help shape and mend the traumatic experiences with oneself and with Other(s). What does it mean to engage in this civil contract, to be a citizen with and of (*with-in*) photography? In *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Azoulay claims that:

becoming a citizen of the citizenry of photography means rehabilitating the relation between the photo and photography, between the printed image and the photographic *event*—that is, the event that took place in front of the camera, constituted by the meeting of photographer and photographed object that leaves *traces* on a visual support. There is a gap between the photo and the photographic event that both those who take an aesthetic position as well as those who take an entertainment position seek to eliminate. Becoming a citizen means replacing these impartial positions with a position that is partial to the civil contract of photography, a contract without which modern citizenship is invalid, insofar as it is the contract that made the conquest of the world as picture possible...to become a citizen of photography means giving renewed sanction to the agreement of photography, to *come together* for photography, remembering that the photographic image is unlike any other image—it is the product of *being together* through photography. (166-167)

This is a long excerpt, to be sure, but one that is wholly necessary for my finishing purposes as it *speaks*, adamantly, on the *closeness* essential to togetherness. Azoulay's notion of the civil contract—bound to the founding of the medium itself by its very communal invention and propagation—wants to re-read the common dualistic nature of photographic experience and to (re)stress the significance of the triadic idea: photography involves three spaces of agency: the photographer, the photographed, and the spectator. Such a braided knot-work reimagines the ethical relationships ingrained in the photo(textual)-making process, or at least injects a complexity regarding the “traditional” ethical approach—even though, as we saw, both Levinas and Irigaray speak of the ‘third soul’—perhaps bringing it ‘up to speed,’ as it were, for a more contemporary and globalized world.

Furthermore, Judith Butler's argument in her chapter, “Torture and the Ethics of Photography,” asserts that when people are outraged at a specific product of

photography, that actually have misplaced aggressions; they should instead be outraged at the social injustices that engendered such *events* allowing such a perpetuation in the first place—maybe it is here that we can find, too, an attachment that harkens to the work of Alain Badiou in Chapter Four: the Event of experiencing the photographs, which in turn experience Events, should engender ethical engagement with changing that respective situation through a loving encounter based on a truth and love. But Butler's positions relate analogously to Azoulay's conception of the civil contract; Butler writes:

the rule is that the introduction of a camera into any place participates in the creation of an event. Taking part in the situation doesn't mean that the photographer has created the situation she was about to take in the photo. The photographer is motivated by an unwritten contract with the public, and she is supposed to bring her gaze on what is considered public interest. (156)

This, in turn, reminds us of Sontag's ideas from *On Photography* that the idea of taking a photograph is an isolated event all in itself. But Azoulay's responses in this concluding chapter come in the context of a photojournalist's duty for the public's 'right to know;' so, again, what about the private sphere, the evental sites born through photographing a private-sphered situationality? And if the ethics of the public and the private have shifted so drastically, as we just queried above, where does this put the responsibility of the spectator, of *any* spectator in any venue, and space? But ending with Azoulay works, possibly, because as this project strived to operate meta-ethically in order to establish a pluralistic ethical framework, so too does Azoulay's civil contract inherently involve the pluralistic, as we have just seen—the ethics of the phototextual *are* by their very nature meta-ethical in such a form of stalwart pluralism.

Elsewhere in this body of this study, in Chapter Three, I looked at a particular scene in Don DeLillo's *Mao II* where the reclusive author Bill Gray is getting his portrait taken: a private life in an active process of being made public. In Chapter Two, I also briefly examined Barthes's thoughts in *Camera Lucida* of how he *felt* the 'multiplicities of

becoming' amidst the dynamic and transcendent experience of having his own portrait made: an already public life transformed into something *e/se*, that is, "into an image" (10).

Yet, another relevant voice germane to such a theme involves Derrida. Simon

Glendinning, in an endearingly personalized and very anecdotal account, talks about how

Derrida's resigned acquiesce about having his portrait taken:

Later in life, he found that there could be 'something good' too, 'in allowing other people to take what they want'...the man in the picture had learned to let it go. He had learned that he could not control what he made public, and he learned to let go. (6)

Derrida's conceding involves an ethical *responsibility* towards the Other, here an other-as-photographer *and* an other-as-viewer. Again, such a recognition encourages a notion regarding the private 'figure' of the public intellectual co-existing in both those states, bolsters Azoulay's insistence on the civil photographic triad, and therefore also reinforces the early pangs, it seems, of the ethical turn, a turn already directing us towards such dynamics existent in the 'new' ethical conversation.

In closing, in the technical parlance of modern camera equipment, one frequently comes across the acronym TTL, an abbreviation that stands for: "*through the lens*." In short, when a camera has a TTL metering system, viewers actively *see* all of the changing conditions in their periscopically mirrored viewfinder, just as the camera itself would see it: a gazing apparatus, in 'real time' so to speak, until the shutter is ultimately released, capturing an irreducible and irreproducible instant. Throughout this dissertation, *together* we looked *through the lens* of photography to see on-to the realm of ethical philosophy, capturing a portrait of its pluralized, illuminated faces. Or maybe, our dynamic gaze through the ethics of the viewfinder granted us new vision *of* my selection of certain postmodern American phototexts. Here is one of the great highpoints of photography: no one can ever take the exact same picture, even the split second of an instant separates an image I take from one immediately following it, no matter how



quickly I depress the shutter button in succession, no matter how closely I stand to the spot where the *Other* has stood.

In finalizing this certain figural metaphor, thus is the call of ethics: no matter how proximal two pictures, two ideas, two entities, two *beings*, are to each other, they will *always* glow with the aura of difference in their new photographic trace. And in the *seen*, we can only ever experience traces of the *seeing* (this was once my ‘instantaneous’ *punctum*); but if we recognize—or, *perceive*—that through a turning back into oneself as Spectator, as a responsible spectator in the civil contract, giving ourselves as open(ed) hostages to the portrait’s subjects/operators, whom also are negotiating the temporalized temporality of an illuminated *seeing* (“at this very moment in this work here I am,” as Derrida’s title reminds us) that will fade into a nothingness-which-is-not-nothing, a clearly *traced* path leading, radiating out, from *beyond the seen*.

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