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Cartesian Blogging, Part One

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Primae Objectiones Et Responsio Auctoris Ad Primas Objectiones

There have been almost 1,400 responses to my previous essays here. The quantity has been extraordinary and so has the quality. Letters in *The New York Review of Books* or *The Times Book Review* can be acrimonious — authors defending themselves from real or imagined insults, slurs and attacks. I am delighted that most of the comments have not been adversarial, and I have learned from reading them. I can't respond all at once, and I have passed by many, fully intending to go back to them in a subsequent round. I ask for the readers' patience.

A number of readers have claimed that I am not producing a blog — that I am producing a series of essays. Nomenclature aside, the idea of publishing the responses of readers to a given text (and even to including an author's responses to those responses) goes back at least to the 17th century.

I recently read an account of this in A.C. Grayling's biography of Descartes:

The great interest generated by the *Discourse* persuaded Descartes of two things, that he had to leave mathematics behind him, and that he needed to write a more careful and thorough account of his philosophy... The writing of the *Meditations on First Philosophy* — began to occupy him.

And he made a strategic decision: that he would circulate the *Meditations* before publication, soliciting objections; and that he would publish the objections, together with his replies, along with the text of the *Meditations* itself. A.C. Grayling, “*Descartes: The Life and Times of a Genius*”

This is from the 1685 edition of the “**Meditations**” in the Library of Congress. It is arranged in three sections: the meditations are first, then the first objection and Descartes’ reply, followed by a second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth round of objections and replies.

So what is going on here? I believe it should appropriately be called ... “Cartesian Blogging.”

Reply to comment No. 8, “Will the *Real Hooded Man Please Stand Up.*” The claim that it’s hard to believe I failed to cite Antonioni’s “Blow-Up” or Kuhn’s “The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.”

[It’s] hard to believe a filmmaker wouldn’t cite “Blow Up.” Or anyone not to have referenced Kuhn’s “Structure of Scientific Revolutions,” etc.

Well, you can’t mention everything. At the end of “**Which Came First? (Part 3)**,” I discuss why I don’t believe “Blow-Up” is about the subjectivity of truth. I hope it is somewhat convincing.

I was a student of Thomas Kuhn in the early 1970s. I plan to discuss “The Structure of Scientific Revolutions” in a future essay on photography, meaning and reference. About 15 years ago, a friend of mine, Richard Saum, sent me a picture of a bumper-sticker he had seen in San Diego: “Shifts Happen.” I wish I could find the picture. Tragically, Richard died some years ago.

Reply to comment No. 25, “Hooded Man.” The claim

that language can breed error — just like photographs.

...the critic is attributing to photography what is true of all representation, verbal as well as visual. Think about it: can you depend any more on written accounts of reality? If so, I have a bridge to sell. You don't have to spend more than ten minutes in a court of law to see that writing is highly suspect.

Think about it? I have thought about it.

And I'm not sure I understand your point. Is the point that writing can be false or misleading? Who would argue? What I am writing *here* could be false or misleading. (I will let readers decide for themselves.)

Here is the problem as I see it.

Photographs are neither true nor false.

Consider this picture of John Kerry and Jane Fonda. It is a [well-known fake image](#) that was passed off as an Associated Press photo. Is the photograph true or false?

Fonda Speaks To Vietnam Veterans At Anti-War Rally



Actress and Anti-War Activist Jane Fonda Speaks to a crowd of Vietnam Veterans as Activist and former Vietnam Vet John Kerry (LEFT) listens and prepares to speak next concerning the war in Vietnam (AP Photo).

I would say: neither.

The text surrounding the photograph makes a number of misleading and false claims. The picture is not an A.P. photo, and the captions are worded to encourage the viewer to conclude falsely that John Kerry and Jane Fonda appeared together at the antiwar rally depicted in the photograph. However, this rally never happened.

Fonda and Kerry did attend the same antiwar rally, but these images of the two (which were combined in one fake photograph) were taken at different rallies. Kerry's was taken in 1971, Fonda's in 1972.

But what is true or false? Is it the photograph itself or the text surrounding it? I would say it is the text surrounding it.

Here's the same picture again.



True or false?

Reply to comment No. 43, “Hooded Man.” The claim that we don’t really have to understand the underlying reality of photographs.

“All we could do was to define our own reality and in that quest hope to define a larger truth. Clawman and Vietcong Man both do that. Relatively few people know who the real men are — and it doesn’t matter because the mental and

unexplained power of the visual image is a far greater force upon our minds than any amount of words and real identities.”

This shares several underlying themes with No. 25. I still don't agree.

The “*larger truth*” is that we all live in the real world.

“*Relatively few people know who the real men are — and it doesn't matter...*” But it *does* matter. If it doesn't, how do you explain our preoccupation — even obsession — with the identity of people in iconic photographs? The soldiers in Joe Rosenthal's photograph of the flag-raising on Mt. Suribachi, the young Vietnamese girl running down the road in Nick Ut's photograph, the migrant mother in Dorothea Lange's photograph.

I agree: “*the mental and unexplained power of the visual image is a far greater force...*” But is this a good thing? There remains the question: what are images stripped of context? Are they nothing more than propaganda — or if not propaganda, are they simply a mirror that we hold up to our own prejudices and predispositions?

Reply to comment No. 49, “Hooded Man.” The claim that I retread work done by Ames, Akutagawa and Kurosawa.

Your article retreads work done by Adelbert Ames at Dartmouth from 1920-1947. He created aberrations in the visual world, and then tested subjects. He concluded that what we “see” is determined by what we want to see, what we expect to see, and what we have been trained to see. To go back further, the Japanese story “Rashomon” ... has the same theme.

I should have mentioned Ames. I am an unabashed Adelbert

Ames fan. I include file footage of the Ames Distorted Room and the Ames Revolving Window in a short film (“Stairway to Heaven”) about Temple Grandin, an autistic designer of humane slaughterhouses. Temple Grandin quite brilliantly developed a slaughterhouse ramp based on various optical distortions pioneered by Ames.



Subsequently, I built an Ames Distorted Room for a series of commercials I directed for Quaker Oats. (My reasoning was as follows: I was advertising a weight-loss product. What better way to illustrate weight-loss than to show someone shrinking in size as they walk across a room?)

Ames’s idea is an important one — how we see the world is conditioned by our expectations, cultural and otherwise. Ames’s conclusion: vision is not “stimulus bound.” It is not solely determined by the image on the retina.[1]

And yes, I could have also mentioned Kurosawa's "Rashomon."

But "Rashomon" has always given me a little bit of trouble. I thought I understood *it*. I *wanted* to understand it, but then I watched the film again, reread the stories on which it is based by Akutagawa ("Rashomon" and "In the Bamboo Grove") and then changed my view about what "Rashomon" is really about. Here's my "*Rashomon*"-like quandary. Is "Rashomon" about the absence of absolute truth or is it about how our vested interests prevent us from acknowledging the truth, admitting to the truth — *seeing* the truth?

Furthermore, what does it say about the *real* world rather than just the *fictional* world of the story? In the real world evidence can coalesce to produce a picture of what *really* happened. In "Rashomon," we have a combination of first-person eyewitness testimony and physical evidence, but do they fit together to portray an actual crime, or has the story been deliberately engineered to create unresolvable ambiguity?

In the real world new evidence can be uncovered, but in a fictional world, we have to *imagine* new evidence. In the real world, we could ask a question: does the policeman eat his soup with his left hand? We can send out a surveillance team and quietly observe the policeman and come to some sort of conclusion. In "Rashomon" there is no soup-eating scene and, for all intents and purposes, the policeman could be ambidextrous.

Early in the movie — about 13 minutes into it — the policeman provides an account of how he captured the bandit (Toshiro Mifune):

To add to our difficulties — compounded by my lack of

Japanese — the English subtitles in the Criterion Collection version are different from the Google Public Domain version on the Internet.

He was dressed as you see him now. Carrying that Korean sword. (Google)

The last time I almost caught him, he looked the same and he carried that same sword. (Criterion)

We see the policeman testifying. And there is a cut to a portrayal of what the policeman is describing. We see him running along a riverbank. He sees the bandit, who has collapsed at the water's edge. Three arrows are sticking in his back. The horse stolen from the samurai grazes nearby. The narration continues:

There was a black lacquered quiver holding seventeen arrows.[2] And a bow. They all belonged to the murdered man. (Google)



There were seventeen arrows with eagle feathers, a leather bow, and horse. All these belonged to the dead man, yes.
(Criterion)

We are asked to assess whether the policeman is lying or telling the truth, and if he is lying, his *reasons* for lying. But why would the policeman lie? What does *he* have to hide? Furthermore, the account he provides is not heroic. It is not a story of incredible derring-do, and it has the flatness of reportage.

Then there are the arrows. What is the meaning of this physical evidence? Who shot the arrows? And there is a further complication. Is the image to be believed, or is it an illustration of how the policeman confabulated — or even manufactured — a narrative out of unrelated details? What is

the significance of the 17 arrows in the quiver or of the three arrows sticking out of the bandit's back?

Is it so surprising that a story about alternative meanings could have alternative meanings?

So which "Rashomon" are we discussing?[3]

Reply to comment No. 57, "Hooded Man." The claim that postmodernism should be given a chance.

"So as not to give a leg up to those post-modernist theoreticians who would throw truth out the window along with objectivity, let's be clear: this is not an assault on truth." I'm surprised you would dismiss postmodern theorists so quickly, given that your arguments overlap so much with theirs. If you read Derrida, Lacan, Deleuze, Foucault and others, not one of them denies a physical reality. Quite the opposite: they all argue rigorously for empirical investigation over universal abstractions. They argue the exact, same thing that you do—that what we see is shaped by what we believe. But they take it one step further: there is no way to describe or talk about the event in the photograph outside of each of our socially constructed perceptions... I would suggest giving 'post-modernist theoreticians' the benefit of the doubt — they would strengthen your arguments immensely.

Herein lies the problem.

I have not dismissed postmodern theorists so *quickly*, but I *have* dismissed their views on truth.

You state, *"they argue the exact same thing that you do... But they take it one step further..."*

Yes. *"They take it one step further."* It reminds me of an article that I read years ago in The New York Review of

Books about an East German doctor who had been indicted for conducting tuberculosis experiments on children during the Third Reich. In defending himself, he said something to the effect, *but I've lived an exemplary life, if you don't include the tuberculosis experiments I performed on children.*

That “step further” you refer to is a significant difference. I do not believe — contra the postmodernists — that truth is socially constructed. There are big differences between each of the following claims:

- (1) Truth is socially constructed or, worse yet, subjective;
- (2) Truth is *in principle* absolute but we cannot know it; and
- (3) Truth is knowable, but there are endless impediments to knowing it. (One of the greatest impediments is that people tend to ignore it or reject it even when presented with it.)

I am a proponent of the third view.

Reply to comment No. 166, “Which Came First, the Chicken or the Egg? (Part 1).” The claim that it is not clear “why the posing of old photographs is such a big issue.”

It is not clear to me why the posing of old photographs is such a big issue. Later war photographers with their Leicas could make action picture but the old timers had to contend with bulky cameras and horse drawn darkrooms. They could not get into the thick of the action had they wanted to. So, they had to adopt other methods to achieve their effects. All early photographs were “posed” to some extent because there was no other choice in most cases — unless you just wanted to photograph a dovecote. While it seems unlikely to me that Fenton would lug around that many cannon balls, it does not bother me if he did. Remember he was a pioneer.

He was not working in an established tradition. All pioneers fumble around at first.

I agree. But I believe there is something important here, even if it isn't clearly stated. Susan Sontag suggests that there is a "continuum" of posing from the past to the present — from more posed to less posed — particularly in war photographs. Here's her argument: old photographs are more often posed; modern photographs, less so.

Cameras in the 1860s were bulky and cumbersome. The photographic processes of the times — daguerreotype, wet-plate collodion photography, albumen prints, etc. — involve complex procedures and long exposure times. You just didn't take photographs off-the-cuff. A photographer had to make calculations, pose people and situations, and manipulate settings to make picture taking even possible. Picture taking was *conscious* picture taking.

I came across a little known fact about 19th century photography. The albumen for albumen prints — at least some of it — came from albatross (or gooney bird) eggs harvested on Laysan, a remote island in the Hawaiian Island Archipelago. Presumably, to take a picture you had to trick an albatross into giving up her egg — the singular of "eggs" because a Laysan albatross lays at best only one per year.

I first read about the albatross eggs and Laysan Island in a recent book about egg collecting.[4] There was one small photograph. Strange, indistinct, hard to decipher, it was also old — probably 19th century. I found some contemporary pictures (NOAA photographs) of Laysan Island, but they failed to provide much information.

And then Ann Petrone, one of my researchers, found the photograph from the book in the Bancroft Library at the University of California.



But here comes the surprising part, she found that the photograph, ca. 1890, was part of *a pair of photographs taken from the same camera position*. To call this discovery “surreal” profoundly underestimates it. I would call it “insane.” When I first studied the Fenton photographs from the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I imagined it was highly unusual to find multiple pictures taken from the same tripod position. Maybe I was wrong. Like twin primes, maybe there is an infinitude of such twins. (Well, maybe not an infinitude but a large number of them.)

And then there are the images themselves. A multitude of eggs stretching out towards the horizon. Eggs everywhere. Wheelbarrows laden with eggs, a series of hopper cars filled with still more eggs on narrow-gauge train tracks, and a donkey. Clearly, the albatross paid dearly for our obsession with graven images and our facile attempts at immortality — that is, for our interest in photography. [The twin photographs and a more detailed description of Laysan will appear in a forthcoming article, "Which Came First, The Albatross or the Egg?"]

Fifty years (or so) later, albumen prints were no longer in use and picture taking had been revolutionized by lighter cameras and faster lenses. One camera that particularly fascinates me is the Ermanox, introduced in 1924 and equipped with an f1.8 lens by 1925. Using the Ermanox, Erich Salomon was able to sneak up on sleeping dignitaries and take their pictures. It was no longer necessary to have a subject's compliance with picture taking. Subjects could remain woefully unaware of the fact that their recumbent images are preserved as if in aspic. The picture is of a meeting of the second Hague Reparations Conference in 1930. The German Minister of Foreign Affairs, Julius Curtius, partially obscured in the photograph, is possibly arguing that the demanded reparations payments are unreasonable. If you look carefully, you can see the origins of World War II.





About 100 years later, cameras had become relatively lightweight, they had interchangeable lenses and prints could be readily made and reproduced. You could take a photograph without really thinking about it. All it took was an ill-considered, possibly even inadvertent twitch of a finger.

The family camera when I was growing up in the '50s was the Argus C3. I can still see the camera in its leather case, even though the camera and many of the pictures taken with it have vanished.



A hundred and fifty years later, cameras, photographs and prints had become digital, and the means of producing and distributing a photograph had changed radically once again. Not only could a photograph be taken with the twitch of a finger, it could be sent around the world and replicated on a 100 million computer screens with the twitch of a finger. It wasn't necessary anymore to even print a photograph. All you needed was a digital file and a computer screen.

But what does this mean for posing? Does it mean that because of changing technology that images have become more truthful? More candid? Less posed? More true?

According to Sontag, yes.

According to me, no.

Photographs are neither true nor false. Sentences *can* be true or false, but the truthfulness of a sentence does not depend on whether it is reproduced on a wet-collodion plate or in a digital file.

Is a sentence in color more truthful than a sentence in black & white?

Reply to comment No. 710, “Which Came First? (Part 1).” The claim that some posing is “more authentic.”

Whether one image is more authentic than the other depends on what your motives are as the image maker. In this case if all he is trying to do is record some of what the conflict looked like. I don't think he can be faulted for recreating something that he and others had already witnessed. On the other hand if he was trying to cultivate an aura of danger in his work then the first scenario that I describe would be backed up by the image, the second would be contrived and a lie.

The issue of authenticity is a troubling one. Sontag *does* make repeated use of the term “authentic.” On page 27 of “On Regarding the Pain of Others”: “*Pictures of hellish events seem more authentic when they don't have the look that comes from being ‘properly’ lighted and composed...*” Followed a couple of sentences later by: “*The less polished pictures are ... welcomed as possessing a special kind of authenticity.*”

More authentic? More true?

This is followed by a distinction between painting and photography:

A painting or drawing is judged a fake when it turns out not to be by the artist to whom it had been attributed. A

photograph...is judged a fake when it turns out to be deceiving the viewer about the scene it purports to depict.

But who is doing the deceiving? The photograph?[5] The photographer? The photo-editor? How many viewers have to be deceived? One? Two? 100,000? What if the photographer had no intention of deceiving anyone, but people take the photograph to be deceptive and infer that the photographer intended to deceive? Joe Rosenthal's picture of the Iwo Jima flag raising is a perfect example. Two flags were raised over Mt. Suribachi. The second flag went up as the first flag went down.

Rosenthal took a picture of the *second* flag raising. It's unclear whether he even looked through the viewfinder of his camera. The negative was sent to Guam for development. An article from the A.P. on the 50th anniversary of the Rosenthal photograph attempted to sort things out:

On the caption, Rosenthal had written: "Atop 550-foot Suribachi Yama, the volcano at the southwest tip of Iwo Jima, Marines of the Second Battalion, 28th Regiment, Fifth Division, hoist the Stars and Stripes, signaling the capture of this key position."

At the same time, he told an A.P. correspondent, Hamilton Feron, that he had shot the second of two flag raisings that day. Feron wrote a story mentioning the two flags.

The flag-raising picture was an immediate sensation back in the States. It arrived in time to be on the front pages of Sunday newspapers across the country on Feb. 25. Rosenthal was quickly wired a congratulatory note from AP headquarters in New York. But he had no idea which picture they were congratulating him for." (Associated Press, February 12, 1995)

Yet the picture was deemed a fake because *others* looking at it felt deceived. Evidently, Rosenthal hadn't pointed out to his future audience that his photograph was of the *second* flag-raising. He hadn't provided a detailed enough caption. And the A.P. photo editors hadn't pointed it out to prospective readers. Feeling tricked, some newspaper editors and readers blamed Rosenthal. They *imagined* what Rosenthal was thinking, what his intentions were — but what they imagined was not based on knowledge but on conjecture, on supposition.

If our *feeling* that we are deceived is at issue, then we could easily argue that all photographs potentially deceive the viewer. Who knows which photograph I will be deceived by? I could be deceived by anything. How gullible am I?

So exactly what is *fake* about Rosenthal's iconic photograph?

After Rosenthal had taken his iconic picture, he asked the soldiers who raised the second flag if he could take a picture of them posed around the flag. The posed photograph of the second flag-raisers is not fake. It's a photograph in which the assembled soldiers are posing in front of the flag. Even though Rosenthal has asked them to pose, and has posed the photograph after having asked them to pose for it, it still isn't fake. It is simply a posed picture of soldiers posing. Rosenthal was worried that he had *no* photograph of the second flag-raising and asked the soldiers to pose so that he wouldn't come back empty-handed.

The second flag raising produced a tragicomedy of errors and confusion. It has been conjectured that some of the claims of fraudulence came not just from a misunderstanding of the circumstances under which the iconic photograph was taken, but a confusion between the iconic picture and the posed photograph taken shortly after. Rosenthal, asked if his iconic picture was posed, thought that he was being questioned

about the posed photograph (see below), and replied: Yes. And so, it was often claimed that Rosenthal had admitted to posing the first picture when he had admitted to no such thing.



Joe Rosenthal/AP

Rosenthal was 33 in 1945. In 1995, at age 83, he was interviewed about his famous photograph in that same A.P. article quoted above: “I don’t have it in me to do much more of this sort of thing... I don’t know how to get across to anybody what 50 years of constant repetition means.” Rosenthal, who died last year at the age of 95, lamented that he had spent a good part of his life defending himself against the claim that he had posed the photograph.

But Rosenthal was right. His iconic photograph was not posed. Even his posed photograph was not a fake. Clearly a photograph can be posed *without* being fake and vice versa.

Here is Errol's Law: **THE MORE FAMOUS A PICTURE IS, THE MORE LIKELY PEOPLE ARE TO FIND FAULT WITH IT.**

And then there are the questions about "authenticity." When Sontag talks about "authenticity," is she asking in a roundabout fashion whether the photograph is true or false or is something *different* involved?

I looked up "authentic" in the Oxford English Dictionary. As usual there are more definitions that you can usefully assimilate. Cherry-picking is unavoidable. But here's what I came up with:

3. a. Entitled to acceptance or belief, as being in accordance with fact, or as stating fact; reliable, trustworthy, of established credit.

...1739 CHESTERFIELD Lett. 35 I. 117 *Authentic* means *true*; something that may be depended upon, as coming from good authority.

...1796 BP. WATSON *Apol. Bible* ii. 183 A *genuine* book is that which was written by the person whose name it bears as the author of it. An *authentic* book is that which relates matters of fact as they really happened.

Chesterfield tells us: yes, "authentic" means true, but then undermines his argument with that last phrase, "...coming from good authority." I'm not sure "authentic means true," but even if it does, shouldn't we wish to have that truth established by something more compelling than "good authority?"

Bishop Watson provides a more congenial — although somewhat bloviated — example[6]. The full title of the work is “An Apology for the Bible, In a series of letters, Addressed to Thomas Paine, Author of a Book Entitled ‘The Age of Reason, Part the Second, Being an Investigation of True and of Fabulous Theology.’” As such it could be imagined as a contemporary exchange between, say, Christopher Hitchens and Pat Robertson (or for a previous generation or so, Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan). It seems that every age has a pair of this sort going at each other with hammer and tongs. Paine is the skeptic; Watson, the believer, the staunch defender of Biblical prophesy. Watson is responding to Paine’s question:

Whether there is sufficient authority for believing the Bible to be the Word of God?

Watson’s first letter in the “Apology” starts off with a veiled threat. Always a terrific way of getting someone’s attention.

I begin with your preface. You therein state — that you had long had an intention of publishing your thoughts upon religion, but that you had originally reserved it to a later period in life. — I hope there is no want to charity in saying, that it would have been fortunate for the Christian world, had your life been **terminated** before you had fulfilled your intention. In accomplishing your purpose, you will have unsettled the faith of thousands; rooted from the minds of the unhappy virtuous all their comfortable assurance of a future recompense; have annihilated in the minds of the flagitious all their fears of future punishment... [emphasis mine]

Watson knows the stakes.

I have thought fit to make this remark, with a view of suggesting to you a consideration of great importance —

whether you have examined calmly and according to the best of your ability, the arguments by which the truth of revealed religion may, in the judgment of learned and impartial men, be established? You will allow, that thousands of learned and impartial men ... in all ages **have embraced revealed religion as true.** [emphasis mine]

Reading on in “An Apology,” I got to Watson’s second letter and the quote from the O.E.D.

A genuine book is that which was written by the person whose name it bears as the author of it. An authentic book is that which relates **matters of fact as they really happened.** A book may be genuine without being authentic; and a book may be authentic without being genuine. [emphasis mine]

The distinction is particularly important to Watson because it is about the truthfulness of the Bible, and as such, it is at the heart of his disagreement with Paine. Paine argues that Moses probably didn’t write the first five books of the Bible. Using Watson’s nomenclature, Paine is alleging that the first five books of the Bible may not be genuine. Watson, deeply offended, replies, even if Moses didn’t write the first five books of the Bible, that doesn’t mean that the Bible is false. It is still *authentic*. The argument seems a little ridiculous, save that something immensely important is at stake. Is the Bible true or false?

How could it be anything other than truthful? Do we want to call God a liar?

The Bible has been endlessly tested for consistency and accuracy[7], and many of our current ideas about truth come from just these sorts of discussions. The problem is that at the end of over 100 pages of tortured argument, Watson ends up saying that the Bible is true because it’s true. You

have to accept it on faith. Clearly, no argument that Paine can provide can challenge this basic assumption.

Sontag, like Watson, is looking for authenticity and truth. A photograph — employing Watson’s phrase — relates matters of fact as they really happened. As long as a photographer doesn’t falsify a photograph by intending to deceive, then a photograph is the truth. Sontag (on page 46 of her book) writes: “Unless there’s been some **tampering or misrepresenting**, [the photograph] is the truth.” And (page 26), “[Photographs] were a record of the real — **incontrovertible**, as no verbal account, however impartial, could be — since a machine was doing the recording.” [emphasis mine]

There are a number of problems here. I quote various passages from Sontag supporting her view that photographs provide an accurate or authentic account of reality, but I could also do the opposite. She often wants to have it both ways — to preserve the idea of photographs as truth-bearing documents versus photographs as cultural artifacts. She tells us (on page 26) that photographs “are **objective** record and personal testimony, both **a faithful copy or transcription of a moment of reality** and an interpretation of that reality...” I agree with the second part of her description but not with the first. [emphasis mine]

Sometimes she is in a descriptive mode and then changes without warning to the normative (telling photographers how they *should* take photographs or viewers how they *should* look at them). She often does not tell us what *she* thinks, but what something *seems* like or what *someone else* might think.

Still, the idea that photographs can provide the truth appears again and again in her writing. The problem, I guess, is *us*. Photographs could — even would — be the truth, except for

us, our tergiversations, elisions and misrepresentations — our endless need to dissemble. There is a “tsk-tsk” deeply embedded in it.

But herein lies the rub. There is no argument. Why should we believe that a photograph is “a faithful transcription of a moment of reality” or that a photograph is “the truth?” Watson is looking for authenticity and truth in the Bible; Sontag, in photography. Sontag’s premise — that the photograph is the truth — has to be accepted on faith. No further proof is offered.

Every generation has had the dream of some easy solution to the Cartesian riddle — the riddle of what the word is really like, of what is true and what is false, of what we can know with certainty. For a while photography provided that dream, but it is a dream — nothing more.

Reply to comment No. 10, “Which Came First? (Part 3).” The claim that I might be crazy.

You said: “And then came the epiphany: I should respond to all 1,000+ — in detail.” Are you crazy?

Yes.

Reply to comment No, 15, “Which Came First? (Part 3).” The claim that Arthur Rothstein posed photographs.

Talking about posed... What about the famous 1936 Arthur Rothstein photo of the farmer and his two children running for the shelter of their house during an Oklahoma Dust Bowl sand storm? Apparently it was a staged photo, from what I’ve read. For instance, the younger child running to catch up with his father has his arms up over his face. The child was asked to do that so he would not look at the camera. Hummm. The Dust Bowl was real, but what do we

make of that? Rothstein would also, I read, keep a cow's skull in his car trunk for strategic placement in some shots to emphasize the very real predicament of farmers and ranchers. Hummm.

Thanks for mentioning this.

I am writing about Rothstein in my forthcoming essay on posing, "Say Cheese."

The problem is exacerbated by the many different forms of the verb "to pose," transitive, intransitive, etc. and by conflating the verbs "to pose" and "to fake," but this requires more discussion. And be warned, it is a discussion that, in my experience, can induce headaches.

When we attack a picture for being posed — often an *ad hominem* argument based on little or no knowledge — we are claiming the photographer has taken advantage of our credulity and tried to make us think something which the photographer knows to be false. He has tried to trick us. This invariably is based not on the photograph, itself, but on our *beliefs* about the circumstances under which the photograph was taken[8].

Reply to comment No. 49, "Which Came First? (Part 3)." The claim that I have been "unfair" to Sontag.

"And so, it turns out that Keller, Haworth-Booth and Sontag are right." I think you mean that, thousands of your words and tens of thousands by those CSI-types eager to support you notwithstanding, you were wrong. I felt even in the first verbose go-round that you were being unfair to Sontag's actually quite subtle argument in "Regarding the Pain of Others": you left out entirely the ethical implications of her argument concerning how we digest images of pain, implying there and above that she's some sort of

“conspiracy” monger.

I admire Sontag’s writings. Her essay on the Abu Ghraib photographs (“On Regarding the Torture of Others”) in The Times Sunday Magazine is an important piece of writing and endlessly fascinating. However, simply because I admire her and have been influenced by her, doesn’t mean I should slavishly accept everything she says.

Since we have been talking about posing, let me give you an example from her Abu Ghraib essay. Despite her diatribes against posing (in “On Regarding the Pain of Others”), she clearly points to one of the most disturbing aspects of the Abu Ghraib photographs: many of the pictures were posed for the camera and many of the events depicted in the photographs would not have happened if cameras had not been present:

“The events are in part designed to be photographed. The grin is a grin for the camera. There would be something missing if, after stacking the naked men, you couldn’t take a picture of them.”

Far from invalidating the photographs, the posing makes them far stranger, more disturbing, more powerful. Posing doesn’t invalidate a picture. It doesn’t make it less true. But if we believe a picture is posed, it changes our beliefs about the picture, and possibly what the picture means.

In my first essay for this column (“[Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire](#)”), I was concerned with truth and photography. Are photographs true or false? I argued they are neither. I also believe that there are no hierarchies of truth in photographs. No *one* photograph is more truthful or less truthful than any other. They all have the same amount of truth-value.

None.

Reply to comment No. 115, “Which Came First? (Part 3).” The claim that I have been addressing two questions rather than one.

There was not one, but TWO questions that you were trying to ask:

1. Which photograph was first, the one titled OFF, or the one titled ON?
2. In ON, how did the cannonballs end up on the road? Or conversely, why are there no cannonballs in the road in the OFF photograph?

Thank you. Yes, I felt that the end of Part 3 should have clarified this. It did not.

I would phrase it somewhat differently. Or at least describe the two questions somewhat differently. But I hope I have grasped the distinction that you made. Here are the two questions:

1. Which came first?
2. Which one was posed?

The question of posing is for me independent of the question of which came first. You can imagine ON before OFF — or OFF before ON — and still imagine four distinct possibilities — that neither is posed, both are posed, OFF is posed, or ON is posed. We are constructing narratives about the event. Extrapolating from a few points of contact — the two photographs, the letters to his wife, and a compote of assorted historical materials.

It was endlessly fascinating and instructive to read various attempts to grapple with narrative. Attempts I should add that are not unlike my own. I hesitated to take the plunge into the issue of posing. Why? Because it deserves a separate

essay or even series of essays. What does Sontag mean when she says ON is posed? That the landscape has been *altered* to create a false impression?

It suggests that Fenton was trying to pull a fast one. I'll alter the landscape and make people think I was in great danger. *Cannonballs to the right of me, cannonballs to the left of me, into the Valley of the Shadow of Death rode Fenton and Sparling.*

But *that* conclusion — that Fenton was trying to deceive the viewer — seems unwarranted. So many readers asked the simple question: If the second photograph [ON] was an attempt to deceive, why bring both glass negatives home? Why print both photographs? Why include both photographs in his portfolio of the Crimean War? Why mention the two photographs in the letter home to his wife? The simple answer is: there was no attempt to deceive.

And yet, even in the absence of an attempt to deceive, my guess is that some people — maybe even Sontag herself — would think ON is posed. Just *exactly* what is needed for posing? An intention to deceive, or is just *moving* the cannonballs enough? For this reason, alone I tried to steer a course away from questions about posing. I tried to focus on the first the question, Could I determine the order of the photographs independent of Fenton's intentions? And the answer is: Yes. Sontag and Keller use Fenton's supposed intentions to order the photographs. I do not.

I don't think the question of posing — certainly not the question of posing *with malicious intent* — can be answered without discussing intentions. It speaks directly to the question: what was Fenton thinking?

Reply to comment No. 114, "Which Came First? (Part 3)." The claim that I should have also

considered “the intentional fallacy.”

The pathetic fallacy isn't the only fallacy that might be useful here. There's also the one literary critics W.K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley proposed in the Summer 1946 issue of the Sewanee Review—the intentional fallacy. It's usual distillation is this: “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art.” They were, of course, concerned with writing (specifically poetry), but their approach to literary interpretation mirrors Morris' attempt to look at these photographs without referring to Fenton's psychology: “External,” or biographical evidence, they write, “is private or idiosyncratic; not a part of the work as a linguistic fact: it consists of revelations...about how or why the poet wrote the poem.”

Thank you. It is an important point. I was aware of the intentional fallacy but chose not to mention it. Here's the reason.

Wimsatt and Beardsley are concerned about “bracketing off” poetry and literature from biographical concerns, from psychological concerns, etc. They are not only giving us permission to read poetry and literature without having to know anything about the writer or the poet, they are *insisting* we do so. I don't like this idea very much. Am I really supposed to look at “Wheat Field with Crows” independent of the fact that van Gogh shortly afterwards stuck a gun in his chest and pulled the trigger? Or to read “The Hunger Artist” oblivious to the fact that Kafka asked Max Brod to destroy it and then succumbed to tuberculosis. And to make him even more like his fictional character — in this instance, a professional faster — he may have died of starvation *caused* by his tuberculosis.

Sorry. I can't do it. Someone tells you: don't think of an elephant. Are you going to be able do honor the request? Or someone else points out that Italy is in the shape of a boot. Can you guarantee you'll never see Italy as a boot again?

I'm not saying that intentions don't count. Or that we should *ignore* intentions. But intentions cannot be simply "read" off a photographic emulsion. A photograph provides no shortcut to figuring out what's inside a photographer's or photographic subject's brain.

I was happy to use biographical information in my attempts to order the two Fenton photographs. If in Fenton's letters to his wife, he had mentioned the order or what transpired between the taking of the photographs, I would have been happy to use it. I would have jumped at the opportunity. If Fenton had written in one of his letters that he "oversaw the scattering of the balls" to make people believe he was in great danger, I would have taken his comments as evidence of his intentions. And I would have used it in my essay. However, no such biographical material exists — to the best of my knowledge. We could try to order the photographs by guessing at Fenton's intentions, but the disparate responses from the five curators I talked to in "Which Came First? (Part 1)" suggest that that approach is less than reliable.

Notwithstanding, by thinking about Fenton's *possible* motivations, we are taken deeper into the *meaning* of these two photographs. Evidence shouldn't be rejected at the outset. It should be examined and judged.

The writers of the intentional fallacy are suggesting that we shouldn't take certain things into account when we look at pictures or read poetry. Who says?

I have my own version of "the intentional fallacy." We should not leap to an analysis of intentions when we know little or nothing about what is in someone's mind.

So many fallacies, so little time.

Postscript: Later this week I plan to post a statistical analysis of the first 909 replies. And there will be more responses to come. I also am working on an additional series of essays. Contrary to the many people who suggested (or stated) that the contemplation of images might be pure self-indulgence and a waste of time, I would like to offer the following argument: It is much better in a free society to be aware of the role that propaganda and images play in how we see the world, than to remain oblivious to it.

FOOTNOTES

[1] This and many other observations have been taken from the [excellent book](#) by W.C. Bamberger, “Adelbert Ames, Jr.: A Life of Vision and Becomingness.”

[2] The 17 arrows is a detail that comes directly from Akutagawa’s “In the Bamboo Grove,” but it’s hard for me to see either in Akutagawa’s original story or in Kurosawa’s movie whether the number of arrows has any particular significance.

[3] I have been thinking of writing an essay to be called “The Rashomon of ‘Rashomon.’”

[4] Carrol L. Henderson, “Oology and Ralph’s Talking Eggs: Bird Conservation Comes Out of Its Shell” (Mildred Wyatt-Wold Series in Ornithology)

[5] I thought that a photograph is an inanimate object. How can a photograph “purport” to do anything? Can rocks purport? How about a photograph of a rock?

[6] Although I have access to a good library, Google has been doing an extraordinary job of making many 18th and 19th century texts available. Both Bishop Watson’s “Apology” and

Thomas Paine's reply can be found online.

[7] Isn't that what many commentators are doing?

[8] Beliefs that may be false.

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