

The Photography of the Disaster

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The ultimate goal...is to affirm the rupture. To affirm it: to organize it and make it ever more real and more radical. What rupture? The rupture with the powers that be, thus with the notion of power, thus with all places where power predominates... Taking on this rupture involves not only extricating, or trying to extricate, forces that tend toward rupture from their integration into established society but also acting so that in reality and each time it is exercised, without ceasing to be an active refusal, refusal is not merely a negative moment.

– Maurice Blanchot¹

Maurice Blanchot's disaster should not be read literally; his aphoristic elucidation in *The Writing of the Disaster* offers very little by way of coincidence between his notion of disaster and typically evoked instances of natural disaster or war. The Blanchotian disaster has a peculiar relation to time and is not easily amenable to lived historical events: "it is being when being is worn down past the nub – the passivity of a past which has never been, come back again. It is the disaster defined – hinted at – not as an event of the past, but as the immemorial past (le Très-Haut) which returns, dispersing by its return the present, where, ghostly, it will be experienced as a return."²

¹ Maurice Blanchot, *Political Writings: 1953-1993*, trans. Zakir Paul (Fordham University Press, New York: 2010), 88.

² Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln: 1995), 17.

Language signals our disastrous emergence into the symbolic order and the subsequent abandonment of the ‘utterly passive.’ Writing is the site where the concealment of passivity – the passion of the psychotic (“dispossession,” “the self wrested from itself,” “total abjection”³) insofar as it does not belong to this world and cannot be conceived of without being completely transformed, or underdetermined as merely the obverse of activity – reveals itself. For Blanchot, passivity is “the ‘inhuman’ part of man which, destitute of power, separated from unity, could never accommodate anything able to appear or show itself.”⁴ It lies outside – or as I will show via Kristeva, beneath and alongside – the symbolic order. In this paper, I want to suggest that reading Blanchot *with* Kristeva provides an effective mode of criticizing dominant historical linguistic narrative and its complementary visual representation in the realm of photography. Both Blanchot and Kristeva arrive at what they see as an exigency for a ‘revolution in poetic language,’ the latter employing an explicit psychoanalytic discourse while the former, perhaps in an effort to be true to the ultimate ineffability of the topic, rather gestures to it implicitly.⁵ I approach my analysis by transposing the argument made by Blanchot and Kristeva from the field of poetic writing to that of photography, and ultimately point to its political significance.

Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror*, published at roughly the same time as Blanchot’s text, deals with the question of abjection as she develops it through a Lacanian psychoanalytic paradigm. In Kristeva’s reading, the father represents the passage to the symbolic order and the acquisition of language and subjecthood, while the mother, though also acting within the symbolic, has come to be associated with the ‘abject’ – the uneasy transitional boundary between subject and object. In her chapter

³ Ibid., 15.

⁴ Ibid., 16.

⁵ It should be made clear that a large part of Blanchot’s argument in *The Writing of the Disaster* is an engagement with the moral philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig (*Star of Redemption*) and Emmanuel Levinas. While Rosenzweig regards the star (moral law) as redemptive, Blanchot meditates on the state of being without a guiding star. Engaging with Levinasian ethics, Blanchot problematizes any thought that upholds this false unity. In response, he affirms the rupture. My argument in this paper builds exclusively on the psychoanalytic nature of this rupture but it should be noted that this is another fruitful line of inquiry into Blanchot’s political thought. Similarly in Kristeva, the ‘abject’ is that repressed element which returns to threaten the boundaries of the moral subject.

“From Filth to Defilement,” Kristeva responds to the civilizational narrative proposed in *Totem and Taboo* in order to interrogate the crucial aspect of the text that is left virtually unexplored by Freud: the maternal origin of the incest taboo. In so doing, she develops a theory of how cultures have sought to deal with those ‘unclean’ expulsions of the body – both excremental and menstrual – as a way of further enacting paternal sovereignty over the subject and solidifying a deep-seated fear of (incestuous) confrontation with the mother. Freud’s conclusion in *Totem and Taboo* – that the murder of the father by the band of brothers instated an intense yet ambivalent feeling of guilt that subsequently served to enact a brotherhood of the social and regulate the law of symbolic exchange and the exchange of women – is summed up in his final statement: “In the beginning was the deed.”⁶ Kristeva and Blanchot, though each with some reservations and revisions, are indebted to this assessment insofar as their work hinges on a positing of a beginning preceding the word, an outside of language.

Blanchot and Kristeva were both deeply influenced in many of their writings by the work of Surrealist author Georges Bataille, which led them to propose a strikingly similar alternative to the stagnating cultural and historical narrative engrained in our language, in the symbolic order itself. Both authors point to poetic or literary language (in the vein of Bataille) as an interruptive mode. As I will elaborate below, this affirmation of rupture is often attended by evocations of horror and disaster – it entails a sustained confrontation with the ‘outside’ of language, a coming face-to-face with the unnameable other that is the solid rock of jouissance and writing. As Kristeva succinctly describes it:

If the *murder* of the father is that historical event constituting the social code as such, that is, symbolic exchange and the exchange of women, its equivalent on the level of the subjective history of each individual is therefore the *advent of language*, which breaks with perviousness if not with the chaos that precedes it and sets up domination as an exchange of linguistic signs. Poetic language would then be, contrary to murder and the univocity of verbal message, a reconciliation with what murder as well as names were separated from. It would be an attempt to

⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. J. Strachey (London: Routledge, 1999), 161.

symbolize the 'beginning,' an attempt to name the other facet of taboo: pleasure, pain.⁷

Any pursuit of a discussion of this kind is, of course, fraught with contradiction: to name that which is outside language is already to place it within the realm of that which can be named. It is for this reason that both authors' work often becomes highly enigmatic, poetic in its own right.

In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva develops a conception of writing as a language of fear: "the writer is a phobic who succeeds in metaphorizing in order to keep from being frightened to death: instead he comes to life again in signs."⁸ Kristeva formulates this traumatic experience in terms of an encounter with the maternally-connoted abject. She locates the abject at the site of a primal repression, which precluded the division of subject and object, writing that "abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be."⁹

The crux of Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory, insofar as it can be called feminist, lies in her reinterpretation of the traditional subject-object relationship; according to Freudian theory, "the father is the mainstay of the law and the mother the prototype of the object."¹⁰ Yet, Kristeva wants to posit a maternal language, a poetic or semiotic language, which involves "a distinctive mark, trace, index, the premonitory sign, the proof, engraved mark, imprint – in short, a *distinctiveness* admitting of an uncertain and indeterminate articulation because it does not yet refer (for young children) or no longer refers (in psychotic discourse) to a signified object."¹¹ The instinctual and maternal semiotic, like poetry, relies upon rhythm and intonation and is dependent upon "the body's drives observable through muscular contractions and the libidinal or sublimated cathexis that accompany

⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 61.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹¹ Julia Kristeva, "From One Identity to Another," in *French Feminism Reader*, ed. Kelly Oliver (Toronto: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 159.

vocalizations.”¹² Poetics, however, still partake in language insofar as the symbolic function retains its presence; the semiotic merely gains the upper hand at the expense of “thetic and predicative constraints of the ego’s judging consciousness.”¹³ The symbolic subject is displaced in semiotics by what Kristeva calls a “questionable subject-in-process.”¹⁴

According to Kristeva's theory, “language as symbolic function constitutes itself at the cost of repressing instinctual drives and continuous relation to the mother.”¹⁵ Through its repression in language, the semiotic becomes the unnameable within the symbolic, what she calls the “transsymbolic, transpaternal function of poetic language.” Entering into poetic language is coming face to face with the unnameable other who, for Kristeva, is “the solid rock of jouissance and writing.”¹⁶ In elucidating her theory of maternal semiotics, Kristeva hopes to go beyond the equation of femininity with abjection toward a more ‘ecstatic’ view of woman.¹⁷ Similarly, Blanchot devotes some pages of *Disaster* to an analysis of the emancipatory nature of rhythm as “the extreme danger” and that which “threatens the rule.”¹⁸

With regard to this maternal state of abjection, Kristeva concedes that the mother-child relationship has always been immersed in language but she designates two moods “according to which the subject is constituted in the signifier”: active and passive.¹⁹ Passivation is, for Kristeva, a precondition to phobic metaphorization. Indeed, phobia testifies to the ecstatic appeal of passivity in that it is required in order to “cut short the temptation to return, with abjection and jouissance, to

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 160.

¹⁵ Ibid., 161,

¹⁶ Kristeva, “From Filth to Defilement,” 168.

¹⁷ Kristeva has often been charged with ‘essentialism’ for biologizing concepts like femininity and maternity. In an interesting article addressing this claim, Tina Chanter exposes the different readings of Kristeva in Continental and Anglo-American feminist traditions and the recent problem of “unspoken feminist commitment to the ideology of sex and gender” which has led to a complete rejection (verging on taboo) of discussions about the body. See Tina Chanter, “Kristeva’s Politics of Change: Tracking Essentialism with the Help of a Sex/Gender Map,” in *Ethics, Politics and Difference in Julia Kristeva’s Writing*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Routledge, 1993), 179-195.

¹⁸ Blanchot, *Disaster*, 112.

¹⁹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 63.

that passivity status within the symbolic function, where the subject, fluctuating between inside and outside – pleasure and pain, word and deed – would find death, along with nirvana.”²⁰ The notion of passivity is afforded much consideration in Blanchot’s *Disaster* as well. He begins with an etymological exploration of the word and its relation to similar words (patience, passion, past, *pas* – both negation and step) and, echoing Kristeva, writes that “passivity matters to man without moving him over into the realm of things that matter ... escaping our power to speak of it as well as our power to test it (to try or experience it), passivity is posed or deposed as that which would interrupt our reason, our speech, our experience.”²¹ Passivity – disaster, abjection – is an emancipatory mode insofar as it threatens the stability of the symbolic order.

Following Blanchot and Kristeva’s deeply psychoanalytic conceptions of disaster and abjection, I want to suggest that they parallel an encounter with a kind of photography that, both structurally and in the spectrality of its subject matter, attempts to account for this “intangible presence of an absence.”²² Conventional theories of photography (prevalent in photojournalism), which place the medium within a historicist discourse of ‘objectivity’ by emphasizing its attestation to what *has been*, often end by effacing the act of photography itself in the pursuit of a pure referent. According to Roland Barthes, it “is neither Art nor Communication, it is Reference, which is the founding order of Photography.”²³ With this idea in mind, I will expound upon an alternative mode of envisioning the photographic image, one that “interrupts the incessant by revealing it”²⁴ and thus puts the viewer in a critical relationship with historicism and the question of representability.

For Kristeva, the philosophical preoccupation with the question of representation denotes a phallic fixation on naming. The symbolic

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Blanchot, *Disaster*, 16.

²² Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2005), 70.

²³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1982), 76.

²⁴ Maurice Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Literary Essays*, trans. Lydia Davis, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Station Hill Press, 1981), 104.

demand of representability is linked to visibility and the image. She remarks that our need to represent everything symbolically has led to a disintegration of our capacity to imagine: “the limits of representability must protrude in the visible spaces that surround us. If it does not, the society of images becomes a threat to the possibilities of politics.”²⁵ Representations – in the form of words or images – must come from the “intimate space of the unconscious as fantasy.”²⁶ Kristeva draws on the obsession in phallic culture with the ‘unrepresentable’ inasmuch as it is, psychoanalytically, the veil concealing the mystery of a castrating violence.

Against this obsession, Roland Barthes develops a dichotomy in photographs between the *studium* and the *punctum*. The *studium* is that element present in photographs which interests only insofar as “I receive them as political testimony or enjoy them as good historical scenes: for it is culturally (this connotation is present in *studium*) that I participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions.”²⁷ The *punctum* is rather that element which disturbs the *studium*, “which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me.”²⁸ The visceral designation of a *piercing* quality is not accidental; the *punctum* of the photograph is indeed often painful, disastrous. It is, in short, connected to the frustration of the unnameable. Barthes, like Kristeva, maintains that “what I can name cannot really prick me. The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance.”²⁹ The child in the process of learning language also learns to metaphorize, to give hieroglyphic names to fears that are unnameable. The phobic person who is “incapable of producing metaphors by means of signs alone...produces them in the very material of drives – by means of *images*.”³⁰ Theories of photography which uphold the ability of the camera to present reality objectively, within a linear temporal structure, also betray a certain fear of those distortions (*punctum*) which are in themselves testimony to the unnameable – the abject, the disaster.

²⁵ Cecilia Sjöholm, *Kristeva and the Political* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 122.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.

²⁷ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 26.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 51.

³⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 37.

Ulrich Baer's *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* is underscored by an urgent call for a "conceptual reorientation" toward our notions of time and history. In the introduction, Baer suggests an anti-historicist theoretical posture,³¹ one that he adopts in his subsequent reading of a selection of 'spectral' photographs:

As roadblocks to an ideology that conceives of history as an unstoppable movement forward, the photographs compel viewers to think of lived experience, time, and history from a standpoint that is truly a *standpoint*: a place to think about occurrences that may fail, violently, to be fully experienced, and so integrated into larger patterns.³²

While Baer criticizes historicism – conceived of as an ongoing and homogenous progressive temporal movement – his notion of a 'standpoint' betrays the very structure he seeks to disavow; it is in the end not radical enough insofar as the *standpoint* offers no ostensible exit from the historical-temporal flow. Likewise, as I will show, Baer's reliance on a temporal index of trauma, as lived (however forgotten) experience, similarly hinders his ability to step outside the symbolic order as time and history. Baer maintains that certain kinds of photography have the same effect of 'belatedness' characteristic of trauma and that, on that basis, they are able to challenge conventional understandings of how reference works. He wants to problematize the facile connection between 'seeing' and 'knowing,' using trauma as an example: "trauma seems to result from the mind's inability to edit and place an event within a coherent mental, textual, or historical context in ways that would allow it to become part of lived experience and

³¹ Baer to a large degree follows Benjamin's critique of historicism, which presents "materialist historiography" as the alternative. As Benjamin puts it, "Historicism rightly culminates in universal history. Materialistic historiography differs from it as to method more clearly than from any other kind. Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its method is additive; it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time. Materialistic historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well." See: Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 262.

³² Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 1.

subsequent memory.”³³ Baer begins with a discussion of the 19th century French neurologist Charcot’s photographs of “hysterical” women, wherein he develops a convincing structural congruence between the function of the camera (and its flash) and the catalepsy displayed by the photographed patients. (Figure 1) Examining photographs that “allegorically make readable the photographic process itself, and ... illuminate the poetics rather than the thematics of photography,”³⁴ Baer shows the manner in which the catalepsy (the intense immobility of the body) displayed by these women “retains by way of the body what photography appears to retain with the camera.”³⁵ Yet, he does not go far enough with his attempt to exceed the limits of a historicist reading of photography. Though he gestures toward a significant change in the terms of the debate, his assessment that photographs can refer back to a traumatic event in addition to referencing a future catastrophe (impending death) remains situated within a linear narrative framework. He writes that “two temporalities, the aorist future and the present tense, are flashed in the same photograph, trapped within that nearly infinitely small moment of the click – just as the traumatic flashback brings back a past event with all the force of the present.”³⁶ The traumatic flashback that Baer deals with is a reproduction of an unremembered event in the subject’s *lived* past.

Nevertheless, I will later adopt Baer’s notion of the ‘poetics of photography’ in my analysis of Craig Barber’s photographic series *Ghosts in the Landscape: Vietnam Revisited* in order to step out of a discussion of the photographer’s aims and rather to focus on the medium itself. Charcot’s designation of his female patients as ‘hysterical,’ for example, merely provides the historically-rooted narrative in relation to which we might question how the photographic method employed assists or resists. Just as the psychoanalytic treatment of trauma relies on the slippages registered in the patient’s speech, the ‘real’ story that some historicist theorists and photojournalists believe to be evidenced in photography is actually often located in incidental details, distortions or spectral apparitions as well as in the awareness of the camera as mediating tool.

³³ Ibid., 10.

³⁴ Ibid., 29.

³⁵ Ibid., 39.

³⁶ Ibid., 53.

Slavoj Žižek uses photography as a (negative) example of how technology is used to avoid confrontation with the traumatic kernel of the Real in his retelling of a Levi-Straussian anecdote about the spatial disposition of an aboriginal village:

Common sense tells us that it is easy to rectify the bias of subjective perceptions and to ascertain the ‘true state of things’: we rent a helicopter and take a snapshot of the village directly from above. What we obtain this way is the undistorted view of reality, yet we miss completely the Real of social antagonism, the non-symbolizable traumatic kernel that finds expression in the very distortions of reality, in the fantasized displacements of the ‘actual’ disposition of houses. This is what Lacan has in mind when he claims that *the very distortion and/or dissimulation is revealing*: what emerges via the distortions of the accurate representation of reality is the real, i.e., the trauma around which social reality is structured.³⁷

Despite his initial, likely polemical, placement of photography within the discourse which exalts its objectivity (would it not also be possible to find revealing distortions in both the content of, and the photographic method employed to obtain the snapshots of the village?), this passage points to an important feature of traumatic memory; namely, its reference not to a single event but rather to a primordial scene of a traumatic social antagonism – whether on the terrain of class struggle as Žižek suggests or, for Kristeva, in the inauguration of sexual difference. It is informative to read photography with this definition of trauma in mind. Žižek’s analysis exposes a problem inherent in Baer’s psychoanalytic reading of the relation between photography and trauma; his maintenance of a literal, temporal structure of trauma. Despite his nonetheless considerable historical-temporal reorientation, Baer remains within the Freudian framework by indexing trauma to a lived event that has been repressed. A Lacanian reading, as it is taken up by Blanchot, Kristeva and Žižek alike, would rather designate the (never-enclosed) whole of existence within the symbolic order as a traumatic experience insofar as it is a constant and ineffectual repression of a primordial

³⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Interrogating the Real* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 243.

disaster which is the very kernel of the Real. Thus Baer's argument – especially in light of what, following Lacan, we can read as culturally and structurally encoded grounds for hysteria which are not dependent upon a singular traumatic occurrence – would perhaps be more fruitful if he were to further explore the nature of these 'unassimilated events' with an alternate view of their temporality as well. Indeed, his theory maintains a phobic distance by again metaphorizing the trauma in terms of a lived experience. Both the 'hysteria' of the female patients and the disastrous photography that I here want to illustrate demand a different view of the traumatic kernel of the Real. Blanchot and Kristeva themselves also struggle repeatedly with the problem of embarking on such an exegesis. While Blanchot adopts the psychoanalytic framework inspired by Donald Winnicott and Serge Leclair, he nevertheless simultaneously criticizes their analogy of the traumatic "death of the *infans*" (and thereby problematizes Kristeva's readings and to a certain extent his own as well):

This uncertain death, always anterior – this vestige of a past that has never been present – is never individual... Outside of the whole, of time, this doubtful death cannot be explained, as Winnicott would have it, simply by the vicissitudes characteristic of earliest childhood... a fictive application designed to individualize that which cannot be individualized or to furnish a representation for the unrepresentable: to allow the belief that one can, with the help of the transference, fix in the present of a memory (that is, in a present experience) the passivity of the immemorial unknown... it permits him who lives haunted by the imminent collapse to say: this will not happen, it has already happened; I know, I remember.³⁸

Blanchot again deals directly with this problematic in the final pages of *Disaster* when he discusses the psychoanalytic use of the term 'primal scene.' Though he suggests that the term is ill-fitting insofar as it evokes a fiction or representation which is in effect impossible, Blanchot praises the pertinence of the word 'scene' "in that it allows one at least not to speak of an event taking place at a moment in time."³⁹ Without this

³⁸ Blanchot, *Disaster*, 66.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 114.

word, he argues, “to speak of the child who has never spoken would be to insert into history, into experience, or reality, as an episode or a tableau, that which has ruined them (history, experience, reality), leaving them intact.”⁴⁰ The disaster as the emergence of the child within history, experience, reality (the symbolic order) harkens back to a ‘scene’ which is perpetually forgotten. He calls this primal scene “the trauma of poetry.”⁴¹ Again: the extreme danger of rhythmic uncertainty and abjection that rises up to threaten the ‘accuracy’ of reality and to reveal its fictive structure. Distortion serves to gesture toward this disaster.

The American photographer Craig Barber provides an excellent example of a photographic method that is permeated by poetic distortion. Though the title of his series *Ghosts in the Landscape: Vietnam Revisited* cannot help but be associated with the specificity of an event, the photographs nonetheless subvert our expectations. In the first place, Barber’s photographic method allows him to avoid the trap that would place his photographs in the discourse of objectivity: he uses a homemade pinhole camera that requires several minutes to expose each picture. During the exposure time, as curator Alison Nordstrom remarks, “the process cannot be fully controlled; vagaries of light, timing and circumstances lead to serendipitous outcomes ... The long exposure time blurs any elements of the image that move, turning branches into feathery gestures and people into wraith-like traces in an eternal landscape.”⁴² (Figures 2 & 3) The contingency of Barber’s photographic method mirrors the contingency of lived time. Barber does not seek to efface his medium of representation in an effort to have the photograph become pure referent. The inevitably spectral quality resulting from the use of the pinhole camera draws our attention to, as Barber aptly suggests, the ‘ghosts in the landscape.’ Though the title of the series denotes the tragic specificity of a lived event (war), the photographs themselves do not merely depict a historical narrative. Ultimately, their distorted quality reveals the importance of *distortion as such* and of those elements which “interrupt the incessant by revealing it.”⁴³ In the case of

⁴⁰ Ibid., 116.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Alison Nordstrom, “Ghosts in the Landscape: Visuality, Memory, and the Shaping of a Generation,” in *Ghosts in the Landscape: Vietnam Revisited* (New York: Umbrage Editions, 2006), 7.

⁴³ Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus*, 104.

Barber's series, the distortions in the photographs are a testimony to the contingent and unnameable in their very disavowal of any direct correlation between 'reality' and its photographic depiction. Moreover, they put us into critical relation with the demand of visibility. The ethereality and intangibility of his photographs remind us that "the depth does not surrender itself face to face; it only reveals itself by concealing itself in the work."⁴⁴

It is important here to note that I am not claiming that Barber's photographs somehow "represent" the immemorial disaster, nor do they stand entirely apart from the event that frames them (the Vietnam war). Rather, I want to draw attention to the way in which the overarching historical and temporal framework (*studium*) of the series, as it is plainly stated in the title, stands in an uneasy relation to what is ultimately shown. The images themselves – a result of the 'poetics of photography' – disrupt the narrative in which they are placed. Just as for Blanchot, writing is a perpetual *désœuvrement* (unworking) of the writer's aims, so too is the expected historical narrative unravelled in Barber's photographs.

To create truly disturbing images – in the sense of a poetic disruption – would be to engage with the trauma of abjection and disaster insofar as this is possible. It would at the very least be to acknowledge the emancipatory potential of distortion and to embrace uneasy boundaries characterizing the abject: to risk defilement in pursuit of the rhythm that "threatens the rule."⁴⁵ Kristeva and Blanchot both locate this potentiality for disruption in writing. Barthes was able to initiate its transposition on to the photographic image, in his *Camera Lucida*, with the concept of the piercing *punctum*. Though I have argued that Baer's otherwise apt association of photography with trauma failed to distance itself from a limited temporal paradigm, he must be praised for his identification of a long tradition of privileging the visual in photographic theory. He writes that "this epistemological tradition insists on the primacy of vision as giving rise to cognition ... [yet] these pictures [of Charcot's patients] insist that perception does not necessarily lead to cognition but, instead, that sight may be severed from knowledge by the very technology that promises illumination, clarity,

⁴⁴ Ibid., 99.

⁴⁵ Blanchot, *Disaster*, 112.

and insight.”⁴⁶ In opposition to the tradition regarding primacy of vision, it becomes necessary to develop a new mode for understanding and creating photographic images. The claim to ‘objectivity’ in photography might be best read, via Kristeva, as a metaphor or hieroglyph which the phobic uses to condense fears of the unnameable. In other words, the discourse of objectivity is an ideological tool for the maintenance of the symbolic order. Any critique of ideology thus requires the “ultimate support [of] the ‘repressed’ Real of antagonism”⁴⁷ in order to denounce the privileging of the nameable and the visual. No matter what epithet we give to this critical disjunction, what emerges is an interruption of the incessant which protrudes (pierces) the visible spaces that surround us. As Kristeva warns us: “if it does not, the society of images becomes a threat to the possibilities of politics.”⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 54.

⁴⁷ Žižek, *Interrogating the Real*, 242.

⁴⁸ Sjöholm, *Kristeva*, 122.

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Figure 1: Blanche Wittmann in a Cataleptic State “Seeing the Insane” J M Charcot, 1879. Image Source: <http://zurv.tumblr.com/post/144812572>

[/blanche-wittmann-in-a-cataleptic-state-seeing-the](#)



Figure 2: Craig Barber. *With the Rain Comes Solitude*, 1997.
Image Source: <http://www.craigbarber.com/index.html>



Figure 3: Craig Barber. *Hope Is All There Was*, 1997.
Image Source: <http://www.craigbarber.com/index.html>