

Film Stills Methodologies: A Pedagogical Assignment

by Barry J. Mauer

This essay describes an innovative film studies assignment in which students explore still photography and Hollywood cinema. The author and his freshman cinema studies students learned by doing—they created their own film stills after Cindy Sherman, employing frame analysis, semiotics, and Barthes's concept of the "third meaning" along the way.

This essay proposes a novel, arts-oriented research method, first tested by freshman film studies students at the University of Florida, designed to enable students to investigate formal and ideological dimensions of Hollywood cinema by creating photographs. We were inspired by Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, photographs of scenes from imaginary movies. Sherman's series addresses many of the problems—identity construction, the relation of images to language, and the structure of Hollywood's visual codes—that we had explored by other more text-oriented means. By adapting Sherman's approach as a research method, we hoped to learn whether film studies could benefit from aesthetic research practices.

The methodology employs two modes: the alphabetic and the photographic. The alphabetic mode is familiar to all film students and scholars—we write semiotic analyses of film images. But a film stills methodology also employs a research mode that is uniquely photographic—Roland Barthes's concept of the "third meaning," a means of investigating photographs that Barthes compares to touch.

The film stills research project has two parts. The first part, employing semiotic analysis, has four steps: (1) examine a variety of films and film images, (2) construct poetics enabling the reproduction of visual structures found in these films, (3) generate film stills from these poetics, and (4) translate the film stills into the language of interpretive criticism.

The second part, described later in this essay, has only two steps: (1) identify "third-meaning" details in the film stills, and (2) translate these details into written text.

In addition, as an arts-oriented research project, the film stills project employs aesthetic and tactile modes that increase the effects of traditional analysis. Walter Benjamin, in his frequently cited essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" offers a rationale for this approach: "The tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at the turning points of history cannot be

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solved by optical means, that is, by contemplation alone. They are mastered gradually by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation.”¹

Benjamin’s advice may help us deal with a contemporary predicament: the flood of multimedia technologies in our colleges and universities. Teachers and students now manage information in a variety of media, including video, hypertext, and photography. Our challenge is to find hands-on approaches to the study of these media that support intellectual research.

The Research Problem. We chose to address a problem that occupies contemporary film studies research—the “legibility” of photographic media. By making photographs, we found a way to supplement traditional book-oriented methods of film studies research. Before producing our photographs, we read a condensed history of photography and film by Robert Ray in which he presents an overview of the problem of photographic legibility.² Ray cites Dana Brand’s contention that “modern urban life provoked a crisis of legibility,” a crisis in which photography and film played complex roles.³ In the following paragraphs, I present an overview of Ray’s analysis. This synopsis is meant to be suggestive, not comprehensive.

According to Ray, a crisis of legibility arose in the nineteenth century when newcomers arrived in major European cities, producing dense neighborhoods where people could not identify others’ languages, origins, and professions. Anonymity, or social illegibility, led to an increase in crime, because people who felt anonymous were less likely to be on their best behavior. The inability to “read” the person in the street threatened the social order, since the criminal, whose identity would remain unknown, could easily escape discovery.

Physiognomies, popular picture books that depicted a variety of social types, were an attempt to make legible the strange people inhabiting the crowded urban centers. These books relied heavily on stereotypes, for example, that laborers have rough hands. It was hoped that photography, invented soon after the appearance of these books, would make the person in the crowd even more legible because it rendered details more precisely than any drawing. Instead, photography, with perfect clarity, produced seemingly irrelevant, idiosyncratic, and accidental details that refused legibility in terms of the familiar codes. Studios enabled photographers to eliminate these accidental details from their images, since the studio photographer could control environmental factors, such as lighting, climate, and movement, for the sake of the coded message.

When cinema arrived, the dispassionate qualities of the camera (producing with equal clarity both “relevant” and “irrelevant” details) again proved troubling. Studio production methods helped filmmakers reproduce more-or-less familiar, and thus reassuring, coded images in their films. Whereas photographic portraiture had derived its codes primarily from painting, cinematic codes were drawn mainly from the stage, the circus, and vaudeville. Villains wore black, had mustaches, and squinted, while damsels in distress had ribbons, petticoats, and long eyelashes. Dramatic events, what Barthes calls the “proairetic code”—train robberies, chase scenes, seduction scenes—were repeated from film to film.

Visual codes were loosened somewhat with the arrival of sound in cinema, since information that had been purely visual could be conveyed acoustically. For example, Hollywood villains no longer needed mustaches. Italian accents and gangster slang conveyed their identities.

Hollywood's success in achieving legibility was an important factor in its tremendous growth. Hollywood aimed to attract the largest possible audience by presenting images that could be understood easily in terms of existing codes. Boris Eikenbaum theorized that audiences accompanied the images in cinema with a linguistic "inner speech" that linked separate shots into coherent sequences.⁴ Paul Willemen, citing Eikenbaum's work, argues that, "without [inner speech's] function of binding subject and text in sociality (some system of shared meaning produced by shared codes), no signification would be possible other than delirium."⁵ Soviet filmmakers, many of whom drew on the theoretical building blocks Eikenbaum established, labored to make images and their linguistic formulations as unambiguous as possible because they wanted to educate an illiterate populace. Hollywood, by contrast, sought legibility to attract ever-larger (paying) audiences.

Materials and Methods. After presenting this overview on photographic legibility, I pose a question to the class: what are the limits of photography to communicate a message unambiguously? We do not answer this problem in the abstract; instead, we produce film stills and engage the problem materially. The assignment takes the form of a puzzle: Create a film still and translate it into a written version of inner speech. The first step is to reformulate the assignment into a set of instructions, a poetics.

Formulating the poetics takes the bulk of our class time, approximately three weeks. During this period, we engage in discussions and panel presentations, finding elements for our poetics within the class readings and film screenings. These readings and films are listed below:

Theory and Criticism

- Robert Ray's chapter "The Beginnings of Photography" in *Theory Finds Andy Hardy*. Presents discussion about the legibility of photography.
- Roland Barthes's three essays on photography from *Image, Music, Text*.⁶ Provide semiotic and structural analyses of photographic images—a very useful set of materials for producing a poetics. Most of the instructions for arranging props, poses, and other photographic elements are drawn from these articles.
- "Images of 'Woman': Judith Williamson Introduces the Photography of Cindy Sherman."⁷ Discusses the construction of persona through visual images and the way viewers rely on stereotypes in their readings of those images.
- Thomas Schatz's *Hollywood Genres*.⁸ Provides genre descriptions. Chapters 2 through 5 detail the iconographies of the western, gangster film, and hardboiled detective movie.
- David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's chapters "The Shot: Mise-en-scène" and "The Shot: Cinematographic Properties" in *Film Art: An Introduction*.⁹ Serve as a practical guide for producing visually coded images.

Art

- Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*.¹⁰ Inspires our own film stills.

Screenings

- John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962)
- George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968)
- Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* (1941)

We extrapolate from all of these materials to generate our poetics; the students, working in groups, give class presentations about how to apply the readings to the assignment. In addition, we use frame analysis to highlight the ways in which visual information is organized in the three films listed above to convey elements of character, setting, mood, and narrative. We then use these films and Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* as models for our photographs.

To test the capacity of photography to transmit messages unambiguously, I add a stipulation to the assignment: Your film stills are to be as legible as possible. Legibility, for our purposes, means the ability of a viewer to infer a sequence or an entire narrative from a single photograph. I add this stipulation because Eikenbaum argues that legibility in the cinema means the audience is able to read a sequence, or action, from a series of discrete shots. We can probably infer sequence from three film stills or even two, but is it possible to infer sequence from a single photograph?

Limiting our work to one photograph enables us to address another research question: how far can we push fragmentation (breaking a sequence into smaller and smaller segments and eventually to a single image) without losing the sequence?

For viewers to infer a sequence or narrative from a single image, it becomes necessary for us to draw upon the most familiar visual codes. Thus, we examine films in which visual codes consistently indicate elements of sequence and narrative as well as character, setting, and mood. Genre films are obvious choices, since we can expect visual elements to be repeated among films of particular genres. Of course, not all genres rely heavily on visual codes. But many, such as the western, *film noir*, and the gangster, detective, musical, sci-fi, martial arts, and horror film, use the same visual codes across many movies. We identify these codes and use them in our stills.

We also want to understand the degree to which particular visual cues elicit inner speech: our reading of sequence, narrative, character, setting, and mood. To help us understand the effect of these cues on viewers, we focus on the most visually coded genres and on those visual elements that are most consistently repeated within those genres. Cindy Sherman's untitled film stills are on the far end of the legibility continuum, since many of her images show a character in close-up, reacting to something outside the frame. These "reaction shots" create a vague sense of foreboding because Sherman does not present enough detail for us to read the situations clearly. Viewers can therefore produce *too many* inferences about the situation and actions. The assignment, to produce unambiguous photographs, demands that we try to limit viewers' tendencies to make inferences from photographs; thus, the ideal photograph for this assignment is one to which any number of viewers provide identical inferences.



Figure 1. Lawyer Ransom Stoddard (James Stewart) heads off a violent confrontation between the outlaw criminal Liberty Valance (Lee Marvin) and the outlaw hero Tom Doniphon (John Wayne) in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962). Although Stoddard prevails, he must eventually forsake the law for the gun. Courtesy Hungry Minds, Inc.

The films we examine are rich with familiar codes. In *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, character types conform to predictable patterns established by earlier westerns: the “outlaw criminal” (Valance), the “civilized easterner” (Stoddard), the “outlaw hero” (Doniphon), and the “virtuous woman” (Hallie) torn by her love for Stoddard and Doniphon. Each of these character types is represented by familiar visual codes:

- Valance: a black hat and vest, armband, gunbelt
- Stoddard: a suit and a law book in some scenes, a feminizing apron in others
- Doniphon: a white hat and scarf
- Hallie: a high-collar dress.

The codes used to structure the visual images in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* are drawn from other films, whereas the character codes are based on typecasting. Furthermore, Lee Marvin (Valance), Jimmy Stewart (Stoddard), John Wayne (Doniphon), and Vera Miles (Hallie) have traits that echo the traits of characters they played in other films. The actions in the film—a stagecoach robbery, a showdown in a saloon, a duel in the street—also conform to patterns drawn from other westerns. Many images in *Liberty Valance* could be isolated from the film



Figure 2. Ben (Duane Jones) fends off an attack by zombies in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). Courtesy Best Film and Video 2.

and would still provide a great deal of information on which to base inferences about other parts of the movie. We could feel relatively secure about our inferences based on what we know about westerns in general and on the ways visual codes help to structure them.

Night of the Living Dead (Fig. 2) was produced by independent filmmakers. Shot in grainy black and white, it is hyperlegible by Hollywood standards. The genre, plot, and situations revolve around a single repeating conflict—humans struggle to survive against ghouls who try to eat them. Any number of frames from the film supply this basic information.

The most indelible image from *Night of the Living Dead* depicts a siege; living humans, trapped in an abandoned house, board up broken windows, while ghouls shove their arms through the cracks. This image communicates metonymically. Metonymy has three forms: (1) synecdoche, or the substitution of a part for the whole (bodily fragments—arms—substituting for whole ghouls); (2) substituting effect for cause (the thrusting arms indicate the ghouls' violent desires); and (3) adjacency (the arms coming through the window imply an even greater number of ghouls are outside).

Filmmakers routinely employ metonymy to imply more than they show, often for economic reasons. Why fly a cast and crew to Morocco when a camel and a palm tree on a studio lot will suffice to indicate a desert setting? There are better

reasons, however, for employing metonymy—in many cases, audiences prefer it. In this scene from *Night of the Living Dead*, the army of ghouls is implied through a few ghoulish arms; the barricading of the entire house is implied by a few boards and nails. We do not need to see a whole army of ghouls to read “army of ghouls.” In fact, we appreciate the film more because we supply the missing information.

Night of the Living Dead's extraordinary commercial success (grossing over \$100 million on a budget of about \$100,000) can be attributed, in part, to its extreme legibility and to its openness. Since the story of humans besieged by ghouls can be read a number of ways, debates flourish about what the film means and diverse groups of viewers produce their own readings: Are the ghouls consumers? Nixonites? Victims of science run amok? Indeterminacy, a certain degree of which is necessary to prevent total predictability and thus boredom, is included to enhance the element of allegory.

Most Hollywood films are built on a highly structured, economical ratio of visual details to information, typically limiting the visuals to the smallest number of signifiers necessary to convey the desired information to the widest audience possible. Including additional visual details can confuse things. Shifts to new settings and characters therefore represent challenges to filmmakers. Thus, Hollywood filmmakers generally “explain” a new character and setting as quickly and unambiguously as possible with a few well-chosen details. Such introductions are good places for us to search for strategies useful to our assignment.

In *Casablanca* (Fig. 3), the film’s protagonist, Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart), is introduced indirectly. We do not see Rick’s face, only his midsection and a table with props. These props—a champagne glass, a cigarette, a solo chess game, and his white dinner jacket—all suggest aspects of Rick’s personality and social position. We test the signifying properties of these objects by playing a game of “substitution” derived from Saussure¹¹ on the *Casablanca* still. Our reading is represented in the form of a grid. Those props that appear in the film are listed across the top, with possible substitutions appearing beneath. The vertical lists represent the paradigmatic choices; these are the lexical equivalent of word choices. The horizontal lists represent the syntagmatic combinations; the props can be gathered together into meaningful combinations much as a sentence links together groups of words.

champagne	cigarette	chess	white dinner jacket
beer	cigar	checkers	tuxedo
milk	pipe	cards	uniform

By imagining substitutions for the props, we can make better inferences about them because their meaning is determined by those props that were not used. If Rick had drunk beer instead of champagne, for example, we would have inferred that he was working class; if he had drunk milk, that he was a teetotaler. If he had smoked a cigar instead of a cigarette, we would have inferred he was a boss or a gangster; if he had smoked a pipe, that he was an intellectual. If he had played checkers, we would have inferred that he was childish; if cards, that he was a gambler. If he had worn a tuxedo, we would have inferred he was a servant or a waiter;



Figure 3. We meet Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart) indirectly when we see him for the first time in *Casablanca* (1941). Moments later, the camera tilts up to reveal his face. Courtesy Warner Studios.

if a uniform, that he was a soldier. We can infer from the substitution game that he is *not* these things. The message derived from the syntagm of these props becomes clearer within the context of the film. They all point to Rick's neutrality and independence; in a world where everyone has taken sides, works for others, or leads others, Rick is neutral and independent by choice.

The Assignment. According to Jean-Luc Godard, "Movies are a world of fragments."¹² The film stills produced for this assignment, like Cindy Sherman's, are fragments from imaginary films, from wholes that do not exist. Viewers supply the missing information and connect the fragments to an absent "whole" by selecting from a set of stock codes. Susan Sontag says of photographs that they are "anecdotal (except that the anecdote has been effaced)."¹³ The "whole" anecdote, according to Eikenbaum's theory of inner speech, is always composed of fragments that the viewer has recombined with missing information supplied by linguistic codes.¹⁴ Whenever we discover that different viewers share the same inner speech, we can posit that our conceptual maps are, in fact, cultural and not merely personal.

The film stills assignment helps us conduct research into a range of problems occupying the cinema studies discipline, including identity, the relation of language to images, the shift from alphabetic to cinematic technologies, and Hollywood's

system of codes. It produces a critique effect, yet it draws as much from aesthetic and tactile modes of working as from critique. While students answer practical questions, such as “What is a ‘film still’? What is ‘inner speech’? How do I make a film still? How do I translate it into inner speech? What does this translation look like? What kind of writing is it?” they learn the materials of film studies. The assignment requires students to work with aesthetic forms, and they use the information in the class texts (such as Barthes’s essays) to address the terms of the assignment. In an arts-oriented assignment such as this one, the arts materials—films and photographs—become just as important as the critical and theoretical texts because they serve as models for our work.

The pages below are from a handout I wrote for the class, drawing upon the ideas students developed in their presentations:

Planning Your Film Still

Construct your film still the way a Hollywood filmmaker would: script it, using the following questions to guide you, before you start shooting film. For each item below, choose the signifieds (the message you intend the viewer to get) *and* the signifiers (the visual elements conveying the messages) you intend to produce from your film still. Stills work on the principles of suggestion and metonymy. You don’t need to go to the Sahara to signify “desert.” Sand and a palm tree will suffice. In other words, indicate which messages you want your audience to “get” and then how you intend to make that message “legible”:

1. Select a genre: Genre is a loosely defined “master-code.” Determining the genre will help you select the setting, character types, situation, and action. Genres include western, gangster, detective, musical, sci-fi, martial arts, horror, and film noir.
 - signified: e.g., *western*
 - signifiers: e.g., *a man in chaps and a cowboy hat, holding a Colt 45, pushing open a set of saloon doors*
2. Setting: choose a setting from those made available by the genre. The more you control your location and keep the “unreadable” parts of the world out, the better.
 - signified: e.g., *saloon*
 - signifiers: e.g., *saloon doors, bar, tables, upright piano*
3. Character types: Choose actors who fit the desired “type.” What costumes will your actors wear? What props will they have? What will they do (in terms of gestures and poses)? What position will they have in relation to each other and their surroundings?
 - signifieds:
 - signifiers:
4. Situation: Hollywood narratives center on a person struggling with a problem; the protagonist wants something and has to struggle against an antagonist to get it. Antagonists can be other people (villains), natural forces (tornadoes), or supernatural forces (monsters). Portraying tension and conflict visually will help people reconstruct a larger sequence from your film still.

- signified:
 - signifiers:
5. Action sequence (proairetic): chase, duel, seduction, robbery, departure, funeral, election, rendezvous.
 - signified:
 - signifiers:
 6. Style: your picture has to look like it came from a film, which means that the visual style should be familiar and appropriate to whichever film style you have chosen. For instance, *Night of the Living Dead* is shot in grainy black and white with crazy camera angles and bizarre lighting to capture the “horror film” aesthetic. Will your shot be a close-up? Medium shot? Long shot? A High-angle or low-angle shot? High-key or low-key lighting? A balanced or unbalanced composition? Remember that each choice you make affects the connotations and the function of the image. Which connotations do you wish to create? Danger? Hope? Terror? Visual elements, when organized, will create a mood. Are you going to make the character large? Small? Enclosed? Which function do you wish the still to play in the larger imaginary filmic sequence? Is it an establishing shot? Reaction shot? Will we look over a character’s shoulder, identifying with that character’s gaze? Or will we look at the character(s)?
 - signifieds:
 - signifiers:

Sketch the composition you will use in the photo, including notes about lighting and any other technical details you need to work out. Most Hollywood directors have such sketches made before they shoot. The drawings do not have to be great art, just useful for blocking and so forth. If you’re unsure about your compositional abilities, you can work from an existing film still or drawing.

When you make your film still, remember to check your equipment: Do you have film in the camera? Is your light okay? Take several shots; you may find that some work far better than others do.

Class Handout on Inner Speech

When you plan your film still in writing, you will be operating at the level of the general codes available in language (the word *genre* is etymologically linked to the word *general*). Find or create the *particular details* that will trigger those general codes in a viewer’s mind. The process of making a film still looks like this:



“Inner speech” is the process of making the film still *in reverse*. You will need to reconstruct the codes that you used to plan your film still by moving *from* the particular details in the image *to* the language that makes sense of that image. If you have prepared your still adequately, this process should be easy. The only problem is how best to represent this “inner speech.” I leave it to you; it can be a narrative that includes a reading of the details in your still, or it can be an expository essay about

the deciphering of your film still, or it can be a point-by-point explanation. You should in any case explain clearly how the details of the photograph figure into inner speech. The process of making inner speech looks like this:



Excerpts from Robert Ray's Chapter Related to Our Assignment

Significantly, the concept of inner speech arises with silent film and in a genre (propaganda) where unambiguous communication is the goal. In that context, what is most feared [by the propagandist] is images' capacity to produce not meaning, but . . . "delirium." Without a verbal soundtrack to anchor the images and constrain their potential drift, . . . inner speech had to rely on other visual elements for the verbal formulations that would bind the unrolling pictures into a coherent statement.

Recognizing their images' potential for ambiguity and imprecision, silent-era filmmakers structured their shots around formulaic characters, sequences, and even verbal expressions.

Narrative . . . subordinates its images to the linguistic formulations they serve. "The sequence exists," Barthes writes, "when and because it can be given a name" (*S/Z*, p. 19). Thus, encountering a picture offering itself as "a still," we will immediately begin to imagine the missing story. Doing so typically involves a summoning of the received categories stored in inner speech, the "already-done," the "already read" (p. 19). To the extent that any of these constructions would immediately limit the image's possibilities, we can make this proposition: in late-twentieth-century civilization, every image lies surrounded by invisible formulae whose inevitable activation reasserts our stubborn allegiance to language as the only means of making sense.

Artists have begun to play with this situation, implying the traps into which our preference for language leads us. Cindy Sherman's "film stills" have become the most famous case, a complex use of photography, disguise, and the word "still" to imply movies that do not in fact exist—and to snare the viewer into "explaining" the photographs in terms of the cinematic conventions (e.g., *film noir*, Antonioniesque angst, southern gothic) already available to inner speech.¹⁵

Evaluations. Students direct their own film stills, with their friends assuming the roles of actors, set designer, lighting designer, and photographer. I do not provide any equipment or developing services. The availability of cheap disposable cameras and one-hour developing makes this assignment accessible to all students. Most students, however, prefer to have more control over their images. Almost half (eleven out of twenty-three) produced 8x10 black-and-white images. Most paid considerable attention to details of lighting and composition.

Three of these images—the gangster still, the horror still, and the detective still—are by students. I made the spy still (I believe in doing my own assignments). These images represent the variety and quality of student work. Each



Figure 4. Three student-produced film stills and one by the author. Courtesy Barry J. Mauer.

image presents carefully organized compositions, coherent dramatic moments, and well-chosen actors, settings, and props. Although they are derivative of existing genres and films, this is no hindrance to their success. In fact, the more these images conform to viewers' expectations, the more readily they can be translated into inner speech.

Once we complete the project outlined above, I evaluate both the film stills and the written "inner speech" the stills elicit. If you decide to offer this assignment, you should reveal and discuss evaluative criteria with students well before the assignment is due. These were some of mine:

Evaluating the Film Still

1. Does the film still look like it came from a film?
2. Is it legible at the denotative level? In other words, is it in focus? Are all the props and characters presented clearly enough for viewers to identify them?
3. Do the props, sets, and characters create a coherent set? Do they belong together?
4. Is the action apparent from the still? Can a viewer infer a before and after, and possibly even a whole story?
5. How good is the "direction"? Are the actors appropriate for the parts? Is the set design well done? Is the composition organized in such a way as to make the story coherent? Is the lighting appropriate for the scene?

Evaluating the Written Translation into Inner Speech

1. Does the written version of inner speech take account of the significant visual elements in the film still?
2. Does it present a plausible account of the setting, characters, props, and actions within a narrative? By plausible, I mean that other viewers could produce the same inner speech from your film still.
3. Does it explain how the visual elements make sense metonymically? Does it show how inferences were made from parts to a whole?

The Third Meaning. The assignment discussed above addresses photography's capacity for *legibility*. To understand photography's capacity to produce *illegibility*, I assign a second project that builds on the work we have already done with the film stills; this assignment requires the students to invent an aesthetic means of using Roland Barthes's theory of the "third meaning" to understand their photographs. The assignment is: Translate your film still into a written version of the third meaning.

Barthes, in his "Third Meaning" essay (1970), examines individual frames from Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (1943). Eisenstein was a propagandist, Barthes argues, and therefore wanted his images to be as unambiguous as possible. Barthes reads three sets of codes in these images. There is an informational level, "which gathers together everything I can learn from the setting, the costumes, the characters, their relations, their insertion in an anecdote with which I am (even if vaguely)

familiar.”¹⁶ This level is denotative and connotative; it presents discrete, legible visual elements and communicates a message drawn from stock categories. In other words, we can read the setting, situation, and characters from the selection and arrangement of visual elements in the frame. The second level is that of signification, or the symbolic. Barthes examines an image of two courtiers pouring gold over Ivan’s head:

There is the referential symbolism: the imperial ritual of baptism by gold. Then there is the diegetic symbolism: the theme of gold, of wealth, in *Ivan the Terrible* (supposing such a theme to exist), which makes a significant intervention in this scene. Then again there is the Eisensteinian symbolism—if by chance a critic should decide to demonstrate that the gold or the raining down or the curtain or the disfiguration can be seen as held in a network of displacements and substitutions peculiar to S. M. Eisenstein. Finally, there is a historical symbolism, if, in a manner even more widely embracing than the previous ones, it can be shown that the gold brings in a (theatrical) playing, a scenography of exchange, locatable both psychoanalytically and economically, that is to say semiologically.¹⁷

Barthes catalogs these meanings in order to exhaust interpretations of the image. Yet, when he has exhausted the possibilities of reading (at the levels of communication and signification), he finds a remainder: there are visual elements of the photograph for which he has no codes, no means of translation into language. Barthes calls this remainder the “third meaning,” or the “obtuse meaning” (in contrast to the other two levels, which he calls the obvious meanings). In the Eisenstein still, Barthes notices that the two courtiers have different facial features and differently applied makeup, which evinces their artifice and theatricality. These signifiers cannot be reduced to character since “something in the two faces exceeds psychology, anecdote, function, exceeds meaning.”¹⁸

Our assignment (Translate your film still into a written version of third meaning) poses significant difficulties for students at first because, as Barthes writes, “the obtuse meaning is not in the language-system (even that of symbols).”¹⁹ Barthes continues:

The obtuse meaning is a signifier without a signified, hence the difficulty in naming it. My reading remains suspended between the image and approximation. If the obtuse meaning cannot be described, that is because, in contrast to the obvious meaning, it does not copy anything—how do you describe something that does not represent anything? The pictorial “rendering” of words here is impossible, with the consequence that if, in front of these images, we remain, you and I, at the level of articulated language—at that level, that is, of my own text—the obtuse meaning will not succeed in existing, in entering the critic’s metalanguage. Which means that the obtuse meaning is outside (articulated) language while nevertheless within interlocution.²⁰

To find third meaning, students look for details in their photographs that appeared unintentionally. The first assignment calls for the elimination from our photographs of all details that are not part of the obvious meaning (i.e., not part of filmic language). By contrast, this assignment calls for us to find precisely those places in the photograph where we failed to eliminate “extraneous” details.

Some students are skilled photographers; their images could be mistaken for stills from Hollywood movies. Most students, however, have not been trained as

photographers. These students, perhaps unwittingly, produce images similar to Cindy Sherman's; their work evinces imperfectly played characters, settings that are obviously sets (or obviously *not* sets, such as dorm rooms), bad lighting, and so on. These stills occupy a gray area between the roughness of the snapshot and the slickness of a Hollywood image.

How do you locate a third-meaning detail in a photograph? What form of writing is appropriate for translating third meaning into text? A group of students, presenting a panel discussion about Barthes's "Third Meaning" essay, brilliantly adapted it as a poetics for this assignment. They located a key passage in which Barthes discusses a frame from *Ivan the Terrible*, in which an old woman is mourning the death of a sailor killed by czarist officers. In his efforts to locate the obtuse meaning in this photograph, Barthes writes:

If it could be described (a contradiction in terms), it would have exactly the nature of a Japanese haiku—anaphoric gesture without significant content, a sort of gash razed of meaning (of desire for meaning). Thus, in image V:

Mouth drawn, eyes shut squinting,
Headscarf low over forehead,
She weeps.²¹

The student panel posited a structure for Barthes's haiku. The first line approximates the denotative level of the photograph; "mouth drawn, eyes shut squinting" addresses the level of perception, specifying the significant details. Line three, "She weeps," presents a statement about cognition, an idea about the meaning of the details in line one—what are the visual signs of a person weeping? "Mouth drawn, eyes shut squinting." Line two, however, standing between denotation and connotation, poses a "signifier without a signified"—what is the meaning of "Headscarf low over forehead?" It is a detail that does not correspond to readings of character, situation, or action. Barthes calls his interest in this detail an "erotics" because it approximates the perceptual apparatus of touch rather than the visual apparatus necessary to reading. Barthes is drawn toward the roundness of the woman's forehead and the low line created by the edge of the scarf because of their *texture* rather than their significance.

The students constructed a poetics from Barthes's haiku. Its structure is as follows:

- 1st line: signifier with corresponding signified in line 3
- 2nd line: signifier without signified
- 3rd line: signified with corresponding signifier in line 1.

Barthes's haiku is not traditional Japanese haiku, but why should it be? Barthes borrowed the form to suit his own purposes; he found a way to translate obtuse meaning within a signifying structure.

By performing the third-meaning exercise, freshmen undergraduates learn how to understand a difficult work of theory. At first, many students confessed that they did not understand the "third meaning," the haiku, or the purpose of the

assignment. In a normal assignment—"Write an essay about Barthes's third meaning and discuss a sample photograph using Barthes's theory"—their lack of understanding would be fatal. In this assignment, the desired effect, understanding, followed the exercise. Students learned that, while photography reproduces conventional meanings, it also produces a "remainder" (details without apparent significance). Barthes's larger argument—that apparently insignificant details are in fact *significant*—points the way to a different form of knowledge made available by photography, one not dependent on language for decipherment.

Reflections. I presented a discussion about this project in a seminar entitled "Reading the Literary Academy" at the University of Florida; several graduate students were quite disturbed by the results—more than half of the finished film stills (thirteen out of twenty-three) depicted women being attacked or threatened. Most of these violent images were from imaginary horror films. Many were made by female students. The graduate students wanted to know if this assignment merely reproduced the dominant ideology in the classroom. I answered that it *did* but that it *had* to for the assignment to work; however, it reproduced this ideology in special ways. Cindy Sherman, after all, reproduces the dominant ideology in her *Untitled Film Stills*. Judith Williamson, commenting on Sherman's work, writes:

In the early work, particularly, there always seems to be a sense of menace, the woman is under threat. And her vulnerability is always erotic, rather in the way that many horror movies which involve no explicit sex at all give an erotic spin-off just through having a terrified woman constantly in vulnerable positions. So strongly is femininity evoked in these situations that they have to be *sexual*—is there any definition of femininity that isn't? . . . in linking the erotic and the vulnerable, [Sherman] has hit a raw nerve of "femininity." I don't by this mean women (though we do experience it) but the *image* of women, an imaginary, fragmentary identity found not only in photos and films but the social fabric of our thoughts and feelings.²²

Like Sherman, my students reproduce the dominant ideology by mimicking Hollywood. This process enables us to move from a relatively passive to a more active position by controlling the "means of production." Our work, like Sherman's, suggests that photography constructs identity from visual fragments—poses, gestures, props—and that we can more fully participate in the process of identity construction ourselves. Also, like Sherman, we go through the steps of constructing our stills from our knowledge of filmic conventions; we see the construction of media messages as constructions. In fact, many students see the artificiality of cinematic codes as an opportunity for humor. Note the irony apparent in some of their images.

In addition, by "quoting" entertainment images in school, students are able to analyze them and bring the critical power of disciplinary methods to bear upon them in new ways. Walter Benjamin justified this move in his essay "Understanding Brecht": "Interruption is one of the fundamental methods of all form-giving. It reaches far beyond the domain of art. It is, to mention just one of its aspects, the origin of the quotation. Quoting a text implies interrupting its context."²³ By making film stills, students *interrupt* the familiar contexts of popular culture by isolating

images. In fact, we create a new context for these images; I put them on the Internet as an exhibit (<http://pegasus.cc.ucf.edu/~bmauer/film_stills1.html>). This is an ideal exhibition space for the film stills; we use the Web as a “polling area” to test whether our film stills elicit the inner speech we had intended.

The film stills project differs significantly from ordinary film studies pedagogy. My students and I create the stills by manipulating powerful visual codes for research purposes. By doing so, we explore visual media and the ideological means—the invisible formulas—by which we make sense of them. We learn not only how to read visual media critically but also how to “write” with visual media. The growing presence of computers in writing classrooms makes this kind of pedagogy not only desirable but necessary. In the electronic environment, traditional essay writing gives way to hybrid forms of composition utilizing alphabetic as well as aesthetic elements: graphics, photos, background textures, colored text, and videos. I do not mean to suggest that the technology by itself is reason enough to change the direction of our pedagogy. Rather, the technology indicates that long-held assumptions about undergraduate research and writing need to be challenged. Teachers and students will invent the appropriate practices for our discipline as we adapt to the electronic age.

Notes

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16. Barthes, "The Third Meaning," 52.
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19. *Ibid.*, 60.
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21. *Ibid.*, 62.
22. Williamson, "Images of 'Woman,'" 104–5.
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