TITLE: A Post-Bacc Staple Thesis

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Contents

Preface

I think of my post-bacc phase as this: one day, I realized I missed writing papers, and regretted not engaging with paper-writing in a more meaningful way during my undergraduate years. I graduated from the English department! How did I fail to feel satisfied with my paper-writing? (the answer probably lies buried under the stale beer-sweat of post-adolescent angst)

Here is an archive of my rampage through Carnegie Mellon University's history department, courtsey of my staff tuition benefits. I'm writing this now as part of my transition into what I think will become my pre-doc phase: the period in which I have not yet applied to a graduate program, but am taking much more serious steps in that direction. Also, now I'll have to pay tax on my tuition benefits.

It always felt a little unfair to the other undergraduates when I was doing my post-bacc coursework; not only had I already finished a bachelor's degree, but I finished it from the same university as they were attending. I was hitting far below my weight class, and I knew it. What I'm looking forward to as a pre-doc is that my classmates will have achieved things I haven't yet reached: they've taken their GREs, they've applied to a graduate program, and, more to the point, are actual doctoral candidates. Me? I'm just a non-degree staffer filling up my free time with busywork.

These are presented in chronological order, with one chapter per course; referrenced sources appear at the end of every chapter.

Major Topics:

- American Cultural History
- Chinese Power Structures
- Aesthetics/Visual Language

Themes:

- Language, and how it shapes perception
- Delineations/transitions
- Informations transfers

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Chapter 1

American Political Humor

Fall 2012, Dr. Scott Sandage

Full course title: 79-xxx; American Poltical Humor: From Mark Twain to the Daily Show

1.1 The Greyness of Mark Twain

18 September 2012

It is a tempting and simple instinct of humans to divide the world into a series of dichotomies; truth and lies, civilized and savage, sin and morality, black and white. However, it is the spectrum between, the infinite divisibility of the grey area, that provides truly worthwhile things for study. The extremes only exist as notions, ideals that can never be realized, for one requires the context of one side in order to note the existence of the other. Acknowledgment of both reveals a vast and muddled space between, in which travel becomes possible. Throughout his life, Mark Twain embarked on his own journey through this inexplicable grey area, and his discoveries formed the basis of his humor.

In *The Importance of Mark Twain*, Alan Gribben defines Twain as the quintessential American humorist, noting that he exists as a "crucial continuity" and a "common denominator of what we want to perceive to be the American character" (Gribben 48). Indeed, Twain's status in history stands as an almost mythological figure, a strange life bookended by two appearances of an astrological phenomenon. Charles Neider describes him as a living incongruity, both a clown and a tragedian, both an amateur and a competent professional, both an optimist and a pessimist (Neider xv). Twain's inexplicable connection to both the blacks and the whites of the world, an intimate understanding of the existence of dichotomies, allowed him to display the gradient of greys as he dilutes whiteness with black and vice versa.

Twain begins his foray into mass publication with an open editorial to *The Buffalo Express*, in which he declares from the start that he shall be existing in the grey field. In *Salutatory*, he provides the paper's readership with a list

of absolutes, such as confining himself to truth, rebuking all forms of crime, refraining from vulgar speech, etc. except when he won't (Neider 1). This is his initial declaration to the literate public at large, his claim that he will not be adhering to canonically accepted notions of custom and law. In this early period of his life, he has already accepted the grey area that will become the color of his future writings; he starts with the pure whiteness that characterized publications before him and rejects it by adding blackness, pushing his position into issues concerning the space between.

Twain found good company in another figure that occupied a similarly incongruous state. He displayed a certain fascination with the late King Kamehameha V when he wrote *The Sandwich Islands*. There, he outlined the existing dichotomies of Catholic versus heathen, civilized versus savage, the incoming whites versus the existing natives. With those categories of white and black established, he then immediately showed his appreciation for Kamehameha's ability to move between them, how he could "converse like a born Christian gentleman" and then "retire to a cluster of dismal little straw-thatched native huts by the sea-shore, and there for a fortnight he would turn himself into a heathen whom you could not tell from his savage grandfather" (Neider 25). Twain's tone is a bit whimsical, almost envious, of Kamehameha's flexible and confusing status; he wrote with obvious distaste and sadness that such a place would be annexed by America, through a process that was seemingly bringing the "lamp of light" into the darkness (Neider 28). In reality, Twain found that something to be ridiculed, as he sarcastically exclaimed, "We can give them lectures! I will go myself." (Neider 28).

William Keough portrays the particularly American humor that Twain frontiered as a more violent, caustic sort than that of other cultures. Violence, however, exists on a more basic human level than humor, and humor as a response to brutality is a way of removing the blackness of it, bringing a dark situation into the grey field so that it can be more easily viewed in a context with contrast. Twain addressed a "Person Sitting in Darkness" from the position of one who occupies the grey area; he did not write from the lofty tone of one who would banish the darkness entirely by shining the full power of the sun into the shadows, nor does he wish to snuff out the light entirely by covering it with overwhelming shadow. Rather, he straddled the middle, addressing both the voice of light and the listener in the dark.

"To the Person Sitting in Darkness is a dark, bitter essay, one that can hardly be considered humorous so much as it merely contains some elements of humor. Sarcastic comments directed towards Reverend Ament, for example, "the right man in the right place" (Neider 284) serve to muddy the normally pure white image of a man of the cloth; at the same time, sympathetic speech to the listeners in the dark, "too scarce and too shy" (Neider 286), bring them out of the darkness in which they have otherwise been placed. He levels the playing field for them by causing both sides to exist in the same field of grey, one that allows a closer relate-ability once they are all just humans in the world together rather than strict representations of black and white.

He goes further to constantly point out dichotomies in order to highlight the

hypocrisy that occurs when one attempts to adhere to them; his Person Sitting in Darkness begins to learn of the incongruities that Twain denigrates when two kinds of Civilization are pointed out, an externally displayed one, "strictly for Export", and an "Actual Thing that the Customer Sitting in Darkness buys" (Neider 287). The Person is given a voice of his own once he starts to describe the incongruities of so-called civilized societies "with its banner of the Prince of Peace in one hand and its loot basket and butcher knife in the other." (Neider 289). The Person continues to ponder such things for Twain, noting that it is "curious and unaccountable. There must be two Americans; one that sets the captive free and one that takes a once-captive's new freedom away from him, and picks a quarrel with him with nothing to found it on" (Neider 291). Twain's ultimate point is that so long as such dichotomies exist, there will be incongruities, as it is impossible for man to remain firmly in either the black or the white.

The essay's bitter dissection of America's habit of violently conquering native, heathen people comes to a conclusion that is explained to the person; in particular, he states that "we have debauched America's honor and blackened her face before the world" (Neider 295). America has been made a muddied grey through its violent actions, bringing the country into a hypocritical and ironic state that is ripe for Twain's humor to feed upon. The joke is that there isn't a joke, but couched in Twain's sarcastic tone, the mixing of black and white becomes an object of ridicule, a situation that necessitates a humorous interpretation in spite of itself.

Once he travels too far into the black, Twain begins to lose his edge of humor. In *The Damned Human Race*, he writes almost entirely from the black, reaching a point in his travel across the grey space from which he does not see a recovery for mankind. He declares that "Man cannot claim to approach even the meanest of the Higher Animals", and "constitutionally afflicted with a Defect which must make such approach forever impossible, for it is manifest that this defect is permanent in him, indestructible, ineradicable" (DeVoto 228). By both placing man in an unrecoverable darkness and situating himself in a position that no longer acknowledges the grey area, he wrote a piece that does not provide or a way out, nor any sympathy for humanity. In this, the absence of humor is apparent.

To examine Twain's spectrum of writing is to see a full range of the grey spectrum, from his early pieces that add subtle amounts of greyness in order to give some contrast to the world of black and white absolutes, to essays that spell out the grey area entirely, and the final blackness of his later writings that stand as the opposite to his initial editorials. The parts of humor that are visible are ones where the grey area is clearly visible, when both the black and the white boundaries can be seen, and an occupation of the grey space is the only position from which that view is possible.

1.2 The Greyness of Mark Twain (revision)

4 October 2012

It is a tempting and simple instinct of humans to divide the world into a series of dichotomies; truth and lies, civilized and savage, sin and morality, black and white. However, it is the spectrum between, the infinite divisibility of the grey area, that is worth studying. The extremes only exist as notions, ideals that can never be realized, for one requires the context of one side in order to note the existence of the other. Acknowledgment of both reveals a vast and muddled space between, in which travel becomes possible and the hypocrisy of dichotomies can be seen. Throughout his life, Mark Twain embarked on his own journey through this inexplicable grey area, and his discoveries formed the basis of his humor.

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Twain's entry into mass publication with an editorial to *The Buffalo Express* shows his curiosity of the grey field from the start. In "Salutatory", he provides the paper's readership with a list of absolutes, such as confining himself to truth, rebuking all forms of crime, refraining from vulgar speech, etc. except when he won't (Neider 1). This is his initial declaration to the literate public at large, his claim that he will not be adhering to canonically accepted notions of custom and law. In this early period of his life, he has already accepted the grey area that will become the color of his future writings; he starts with the clean light that characterized publications before him, that "custom is law, and custom must be obeyed" (Neider 1) and immediately rejects it by adding a little bit of darkness, pushing his position into issues concerning the space between.

Before he really settled into his position of writing from the grey, Twain studied other figures that appeared in a state of incongruity. He displayed a certain fascination with the late King Kamehameha V when he wrote "The Sandwich Islands". There, he outlined the existing dichotomies of Catholic versus heathen, civilized versus savage, the incoming whites versus the existing natives. With those categories of light and darkness established, he then immediately showed his appreciation for Kamehameha's ability to move between them, how he could "converse like a born Christian gentleman" and then "retire to a cluster of dismal little straw-thatched native huts by the sea-shore, and there for a fortnight he would turn himself into a heathen whom you could not tell from his savage grandfather" (Neider 25). Twain's tone is a bit whimsical, almost

envious, of Kamehameha's flexible and confusing status; he wrote with obvious distaste and sadness that such a place would be annexed by America, through a process that was seemingly bringing the "lamp of light" into the darkness (Neider 28). In reality, Twain found that something to be ridiculed, as he sarcastically exclaimed, "We can give them lectures! I will go myself." (Neider 28). He saw the imperialistic act of assimilating and westernizing the natives as a destruction of culture; rather than criticize it outright, though, he pretended to support the cause with this exaggerated speech that more effectively showed his alarm.

William Keough portrays the particularly American humor that Twain frontiered as a more violent, caustic sort than that of other cultures. Violence, however, exists on a more basic human level than humor; it is the force that ends life while love is the act that creates it, and humor is a response to both. Using humor to address brutality is a way of reducing the darkness of it, bringing it into the grey field so that it can be more easily viewed in a context with contrast. Twain addressed a "Person Sitting in Darkness" from the position of one who occupies the grey area; he did not write from the lofty tone of one who would banish the darkness entirely by shining the full power of the sun into the shadows, nor does he wish to snuff out the light entirely by covering it with overwhelming shadow. Rather, he straddled the middle, addressing both the voice of light and the listener in the dark.

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The core of this essay is an identification of dichotomies, which highlight the hypocrisy that occurs when one attempts to adhere to them; his Person Sitting in Darkness begins to learn of the incongruities that Twain denigrates when two kinds of Civilization are pointed out, an externally displayed one, "strictly for Export", and an "Actual Thing that the Customer Sitting in Darkness buys" (Neider 287). The Person is given a voice of his own once he starts to describe the incongruities of so-called civilized societies "with its banner of the Prince of Peace in one hand and its loot basket and butcher knife in the other." (Neider 289). The Person continues to ponder such things for Twain, noting that it is "curious and unaccountable. There must be two Americans; one that sets the captive free and one that takes a once-captive's new freedom away from him, and picks a quarrel with him with nothing to found it on" (Neider 291). Twain's ultimate point is that so long as such dichotomies exist, there will be incongruities, as it is impossible for man to remain firmly in either absolute state.

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1.3 The Importance of Being Obnoxious

16 December 2016

The self-publishing platform, lack of regulation, and relatively anonymous means of content distribution provided by the internet allows for certain types of humor to develop that could not flourish under any other circumstance. In particular, the nature of the internet promotes a sort of derisive humor, as it lowers the social risks normally present in making and enjoying distasteful jokes or deliberately offensive commentary. Through the collection of articles on *The Best Page in the Universe*, pseudonymous humorist Maddox demonstrated that on the internet, sometimes it's effective to be an asshole.

The Best Page in the Universe started in 1998, and has remained stylistically unchanged from its original format of bland white text on a black background with no other features other than the occasional colored text for emphasis and badly drawn graphics to illustrate particularly rude points. The only perceptible modernization is the addition of buttons at the bottom of each article that allow

the viewer to link that particular page with one's social network of choice. His website followed a common path of websites; it started as a personal space for rants that spread by word of mouth until he reached the status of internet superhero for his unapologeticallly scathing essays about punching women, killing babies, and the depressing stupidity of mankind. Curiously enough, and perhaps indicitive of the egotism and self-awareness frequently seen in high-profile comedians, Maddox pointed out his own fame in the aptly-titled article "How is it possible that a guy with a small penis and a hairy back is more powerful than Pepsi on the Internet?" in which he charted money spent on advertising versus Alexa.com page ranking. Although he never offered an answer to that question, he painted the incongruous image that "corporate sites have promotions, games, and discounts, yet more people come to this site every day and read stupid bullshit about how big my balls are" (Maddox).

Maddox's questioning of his own position on the internet highlights the recurring theme seen in a history of political humorists, that "[t]he humor arises out of the gap between the cultural ideal and the everyday fact, with the ideal shown to be somewhat hollow and hypocritical, and the fact crude and disgusting" (Rubin, 262). In fact, the internet itself may represent the final frontier of Rubin's Great American Joke; it presents a platform where anyone with a computer and a connection can place content in the same space, which often places eloquently worded commentary next to incomprehensibly illiterate babble. Even if a particular website only contains polished, edited, and serious material, there's no stopping a user from having that page open next to pictures of cats that look like Hitler. It is, as Rubin says, "a society based theoretically upon the equality of all men...and the incongruities are likely to be especially observable" (Rubin, 263). In such a world, the fact that Maddox's crude and frivolous articles display a measurably stronger hold on viewers than carefully crafted online brands show that there must be something viewers want that he is providing.

In *Cracking Up*, Paul Lewis points to "an eagerness to provoke and be provoked" as the basis for derisive humor, that jokes have evolved to having a specific target and agenda in mind (Lewis, 6-7). Once this crosses into the realm of aggressive and violent jokes, he asserts that it "bars the butt/victim from joining in the laughter and puts the viewer in the awkward position of laughing with a monster, refusing to do so, or sustaining an uneasy ambivalence" (Lewis, 25). An interesting twist on Lewis's butt wars is that Maddox explicitly targets his readers in his attacks. Following an April Fool's prank in which he drastically altered the format of his website, he posted "How do you dumbasses manage to breathe?" as a response to the flood of bewildered, concerned, and sometimes outraged responses to the appearance of his website. He ends the article with "[a]fter reading a few thousand emails like the ones above, I seriously considered taking down my site and just posting links to animal porn for you retards. You're all idiots, and I've lost what little respect I've had for you" (Maddox). Despite being constantly openly hostile and degrading to his readers, people keep coming back, as evidenced by the page view counter on that article; it reads over two and a half million visitors eight years after it was

originally published.

Perhaps what brings readers back, though, is knowing that they personally were not the ones writing Maddox stupid emails. Despite the fact that Maddox directly addresses the reader and unabashedly generalizes all of his readers to the same label of ignorant twats, any particular reader can enjoy the jokes by knowing that he only really meant people stupid enough to send him stupid emails. Like Lenny Bruce reading court transcripts as part of his stand-up act, Maddox publishes choice examples of hate mail, offering both dismissive commentary and scathing rebuttals. While other writers on the internet will leave open the option to comment on articles directly, Maddox maintains the old-fashioned method of publishing letters-to-the-editor as he sees fit; his audience has no way to verify the authenticity of any submission, and those emails become further props and objects of ridicule.

Despite the generally immature nature of his articles, Maddox often touches on political topics with serious social consequences. At the heart of his articles is an impressive ability to get extremely angry at virtually anything, and he treats political issues that strike him as unforgivingly stupid just as badly as he treats his readers who can't tell when he's pulling an April Fool's joke. Corruption of the police, hypocrisy of activists, partisan hackery, and censorship are frequently recurring topics, particularly as they highlight the incongruities at the base of every Great American Joke.

In addition to just ridiculing politics, though, he has leveraged his readership for calls to action. During the January 2012 web-protests against the Stop Online Piracy Act, he wrote "I hope SOPA passes," an article that, contrary to its title, didn't promote the highly controversial bill, but instead questioned the effectiveness of protests that only raise awareness of issues without making attempts to effect change. His refusal to participate in the protest by blacking out his website for a day was "because it doesn't address any problems, only the symptom" (Maddox), referring to his belief that even defeating one particular bill wouldn't make a difference because lobbyists would just push a new one. Not willing to mark himself a hypocrite for describing problems without offering solutions, he compiled a list of companies known to support the bill, encouraging his readers to boycott them, and additionally opening up discussion for boycotting tactics and other effective ways to fight the greater problem at hand. He asserted that defeating SOPA was "like trying to stop a cold by blowing your nose. It's time we go after the virus" (Maddox).

Peter Robinson explored an ongoing relationship between comedians and politicians through their influences on the public; he concluded that "the political comedians would be invested with the sort of comprehensive sovereignty that presidents and candidates can only dream of: political influence, economic power, and cultural celebrity" (Robinson, 214). In Maddox's case, his status as a celebrity comes first, and his cult following generates the rest. He directs a naturally abrasive persona towards producing humor that is, on the surface, degrading and offensive to virtually everybody, but he wouldn't have the popularity that he does if there wasn't a current of truth running through his words. His essays are satirical, gross exaggerations of problems in society that peo-

ple are already aware of, only he challenges how people think about them in addition to pointing out that they exist.

1.4 References

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Chapter 2

Trajectories in Photography

Fall 2013; Dr. Leo Hsu

2.1 Analysis of Wilson Hicks: "What is Photojournalism?"

Hicks occupied a position that gave him a substantial amount of authority on photojournalism; he contributed to the medium in a way that made him a witness to the evolution of photojournalism, just as the photojournalist was a witness to news stories. That said, it also put him in a position of power as a firsthand reporter on something he helped to create. Overall, he writes in concrete, absolute statements, often presenting questions or counter-arguments immediately after his point and then addressing them—an apt reflection of his position as the journalist of photojournalism.

To address the question he posed in his title, Hicks breaks the problem down into two approaches: first, he defines photojournalism from within by excising its components and asserting how each segment functions as part of the whole medium; second, he describes photojournalism externally by providing an overview of the social and technological developments worldwide that needed to occur in order for photojournalism to have a place. Both approaches are necessary for a complete statement on an otherwise complicated medium with many variables and expectations; the initial technical definition comes first as a foothold for the reader to understand the social structure that comes second.

By Hicks's technical definition, photojournalism is a combination of words and pictures; more directly, it is one unit of expression that affects both the eyes and the ears of the reader (words, he states, as a means to stimulate the ears, and pictures to stimulate the eyes). This unit combines with what he calls the 'X-factor'—the ideas, memories, and beliefs carried by the reader—in order to form an experience that is greater than what each of the three segments could have provided alone. With this, then, the existence of an audience is crucial to the success of Hicks's photojournalism. In the production of photojournalism,

he ascribes each piece to a separate role: the writer, the photographer, and the editor, that even if one person holds multiple roles, all three must exist in a balanced, cohesive group in order to achieve success.

Additional to the three segments of a unit of photojournalism, Hicks deconstructs how the photograph itself contributes to the experience. He points out that in reality, human vision is limited, affected by the mind's capacity to observe and process imagery; the camera, in that sense, has a superior perception of the visual world, able to mechanically record images without the burden of emotions. Furthermore, photographs gave people the ability to examine an image free of the immediacy of reality, and thus allows the formation of a new sort of emotional response not previously possible. It's this particular power of photography that Hicks claims as a major contributor to the success of photojournalism.

In tracing the social trajectory of photojournalism, Hicks attributes the turning point to the technological advancements offered by the Leica, a camera that was so small and unobtrusive compared to previous machines. Previously, the presence of a camera unavoidably changed events due to the physical intrusion of a camera and all its related entourage, but once the actual act of photography was simplified, entirely different photographs were possible—rapid sequences, low light, and less arranged shoots, to name a few. Coupled with the ability to distribute photographs in print media, photographs became a more integrated part of journalism, rather than just an illustrative or design element to accompany text. With the Leica, photographers were able to speak to the point that Hicks makes about why photography is effective: the non-intrusive images showed scenes that viewers could interpret as if they were there, but without the problems of faulty perception and memory. Additionally, photographers themselves could hone and rely on their instincts for capturing images with the potential to have this effect.

The interesting part about Hicks's account of the development of photojournalism, specifically with regards to *Life*, is that his syntax does not give away, or even imply, that he was involved heavily with its production. However, the breadth of detail and absolute descriptions give a sense of witness to that development; it's as if he wanted to see photojournalism in the way that the camera saw events, with the ability to record and not judge. That said, the selectivity of the camera applied to Hicks's position as well; the more absolute his statements, the narrower a path he must take, and his perspective did not allow intrusions beyond the definitions he carefully laid out.

2.2 Flakey Imagery

12 December 2013

Humans are visual creatures and scientists are ever hungry for more information. So, when Wilson Bentley, a quiet farm boy from Vermont, presented the world with photographic evidence of something that is now recognizable as the canonical representation of a snowflake, the world accepted his vision as the

ideal that has always been desired. His images were the result of a deep personal obsession with what he believed to be the true, pure form of a snowflake, regardless of what actually fell from the skies. Despite that, the scientific community was willing to overlook flaws in his method for the sake of accessing data they previously did not have, and popular culture enthusiastically received the iconic image that filled a gap in the collective visual vocabulary.

The popular notion of a snowflake is a perfect, symmetrical figure—a flat, six-pointed shape that schoolchildren can cut from a carefully folded piece of paper. This iconic form is used as a universally recognizable symbol for snow, from winter-themed decorations to weather alerts that rely on the concision of pictograms rather than text. However, there was no widely accepted representation of snow prior to the publication of Bentley's photographic work in 1901. A spotty history of snowflake imagery turns up very few instances of recognition of that shape, being mostly drawings rendered from some combination of magnified viewing with the memory and imagination of the artist; snowflakes melted in a fraction of the time it took for a drawing to be made, and thus creating a faithful representation was both tedious and not really possible.

At the age of fifteen, Bentley started his pursuit of the snowflake in 1880 with a microscope that was given to him as a birthday present. He took an approach similar to the snowflake documentarians of the past; he would catch snowflakes as they fell, look for one that seemed properly suited for illustration, then attempt to draw it freehand while observing the rapidly deteriorating form under a microscope (Blanchard 24). He found the process frustrating, especially as it highlighted the fleeting nature of his subjects, which he considered "miracles of beauty; and it seemed a shame that this beauty should not be seen and appreciated by others" (22). Here, though, he had already begun his process of manipulating the image of a snowflake; the sort of crystal he was attracted to was an extremely rare form, produced only under very specific weather conditions, and only through a lot of luck and patience was he able to capture one for his examination. As he was a hobbyist, not a scientist, his culling of ugly snowflakes could hardly be criticized.

Once Bentley started taking photographs of his favorite snowflakes in 1885, his work took a different form; he was still only photographing snowflakes as a hobby, since his primary job was to work on his family farm and he could only entertain his need to document snowflakes as part of his leisure time. Still, he devoted as much time as he could every winter to chase his obsession, keeping detailed notes on weather conditions each day, as well as precise technical information about each exposure he captured (44–45). This level of detail and commitment to the task was a significant advantage to his entry into the world of scientists, even though he had no scientific background himself. Anyone who could manually produce hundreds of individually-captured snowflake photographs, as well as produce such an expansive amount of information about each one, easily gained the respect of the scientific community of his time.

A similar body of work produced just prior to his birth failed to gain serious recognition; an unnamed woman produced a book of drawings and poetry about snowflakes, and submitted them to a Harvard professor for his advice. Even as

he respected the artistic merit of her work, he suggested that she present the drawings in a more scientific tone, "otherwise the whole would be useless to students of nature, and only to be looked at as an elegant toy, fit to excite the curiosity, but not to impart information" (61–62). Her work was apparently not well popularized, perhaps as a combination of not reaching the right audience at the right time, and not having enough appeal as either art or science.

Bentley's work, on the other hand, saw almost instant success once it fell into the hands of meteorologists. Beginning in 1899, he started selling his snowflake photographs to scientists at five cents per print, including his detailed technical notes with each image. The prints were made from duplicate negatives, which he carefully etched in an attempt to improve the appearance of the details of the flake; because it was virtually impossible to capture an entirely clean image of a perfectly symmetrical, unbroken snowflake, he allowed himself to modify the photographs that were ultimately to be shared, just to make sure that his vision of the pure snowflake was sustained. The resulting photographs were so impressive that his modifications were generally overlooked in favor of being able to study the overall body of work.

At this stage, he was very open and forthcoming about his methods, including notes that his photographs neglected to show an average view of snowflakes. In a letter to meteorologist Abbot Rotch included with an order of photographs, he readily admitted that "the average forms are much less perfect & beautiful" (68), and described what sorts of weather conditions produce the more perfect snowflake he sought. Despite this open declaration of his selectivity in providing specimens for scientific study, his images were rapidly acquired by the scientific community. Rotch's response did not even comment on Bentley's obvious bias for aesthetic beauty; he only encouraged Bentley by paying for extra photographs and spreading the images to other people who were studying weather phenomena (68).

By 1902, Bentley became known for his skill in photographing snowflakes, a task that had not been performed so successfully due to the technical challenges with the equipment available at the time. As a result, his work was in demand by multiple publications and studies; on request, he produced a ten page article with 255 photographs of snowflakes for the *Monthly Weather Review*, a scientific journal of meteorology, and thus solidly set himself a place at the scientists' table, despite still being a potato farmer from Vermont. For that article, he understood the need to document a more average selection of snowflakes; despite that, he had a hard time shaking his desire to show only the snowflakes he found worthy. He admitted:

> This proved the most difficult task of all, because the old habit of seeking for the beautiful and interesting, rather than the characteristic types, was very difficult to overcome. For this reason, I fear the winter's photographic record portrays far more fully the general character of the beautiful and interesting than it does the broken or unsymmetrical types. And yet there are few, perhaps, who after viewing the feast of beauty filling these pages will regret our

> shortcomings in this regard (88).

In the current standards of scientific publication, it seems implausible that such obviously aeshetically-driven work produced by someone with no training in scientific process should be published as legitimate research.

Bentley was producing his photographs at a time when the role of photography was not yet well defined in any field—artists looked at photography with great skepticism, scientists had yet to understand its potential utility, and no real commercial venture existed. In that respect, the fact that Bentley's background did not have any obvious ties to the current modes of photography might not even have mattered. At the time, no one knew how to categorize the act of photography; all that was relevant was that someone had managed to cheaply mass-produce images of something that previously hadn't been easily seen with such clarity, and for the sake of scientific and cultural progress, that work was accepted regardless of its haphazard provenance. In other words, he filled a need that society had, during a time when both images and information were insatiably consumed in a post Industrial Revolution era.

There's a relationship that exists between the photographic process and the notion of objectivity. An attractive belief is that the camera's inability to create a falsehood and photography's reliance on the visual existence of the actual object being photographed implies an indisputable source of objectivity. In Bentley's case, he attempted to capture an objective representation of a subjective beauty—that being snowflakes in a state of purity, untainted by their existence in the real world. Rather than document the specimens he considered faulty and unworthy, he distilled his vision by not even allowing those natural faults to make it onto film at all. However, the reality of snow does not lie in what he decided to show; it lies in a more average, realistic selection of snowflakes that never appeared in his portrait of snow. Furthermore, the images that he chose to share were individually manipulated to display his belief of each snowflake's ideal beauty; even though he made unmodified, original negatives available for inspection, the point is moot because only modified images ever entered the popular view.

Regardless of what real snow actually looks like, the process of making a recognizable illustrative image necessitates an abstraction of the original form into a simpler, more appealing shape. Ideography is just that—turning ideas into simple pictures. The picture only needs to bear a slight resemblance to the original, and also needs enough pervasion in popular use to become accepted as a canonical graphic. Manipulated or not, Bentley's photographs provided a crisp graphic form that was easily mimicked in illustrations, and also experienced the pervasion through cultural media that allowed the form to become popularized. Art does not require objectivity in order to be successful; Bentley's photographs as just works of art were accepted because he was able to show objects of beauty in a way that were never seen before. Conveniently, his photographs showed snowflakes in a way that made for an obvious ideograph.

Bentley's work was only successful because it came during a period of shifting standards of objectivity. In current scientific communities, his work wouldn't

stand a chance at gaining recognition as a rigorous documentation of a natural phenomenon due to his selection bias and manipulation of captured images. However, at the time he was producing his work, such a body of images did not yet exist, and there were no facilities capable of creating them. The fact that there was such a sheer volume of images that no one had seen before, coupled with his detailed technical notes and willingness to practically give the work away, created exactly the sort of situation for his work to become popular. His obsession with the pursuit of cataloguing his own notion of beauty and perfection resulted in the canonical snowflake image today.

2.3 References

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Chapter 3

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Chapter 7

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