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What is Visual Studies? — Barthes's Signs and the Yen *Satori*

What is visual studies? Before tackling such a broad and difficult question, I feel it appropriate to go back to the beginning; to explore not just what visual studies means to me, now, at the culmination of my brief experience in the field, but to reflect on how its meaning has developed and grown since I was first exposed to the field. At the beginning of the semester, I assumed, mostly because of the name, that visual studies would encompass just that which can be seen: i.e. physical images. But at the culmination of the semester, I have come to the conclusion that visual studies is a bit of a misnomer. What I feel visual studies truly entails is not just that which can be seen, but more broadly, what can be communicated extra-verbally— a kind of void of explicit communication that gives way to a more subjective, personal one. In his book "Empire of Signs", Barthes investigates this very notion of an "emptiness of language", the Yen *satori.* Through various signs, (those "flashes" that supply a "shock of meaning" and gives Barthes a "situation of writing") Barthes describes the *satori* he experienced during his travels in Japan (the "empire"). In this paper, I will first summarize how *satori* manifests itself in three of Barthes's signs, then I will compare *satori* to the *punctum* from Barthes's "Camera Lucida", and finally I will connect the notion of *satori* to the greater topic of visual studies.

Barthes only directly relates *satori* to one of his signs relatively late in Empire of Signs when he talks about the haiku, but evidence of *satori* is threaded throughout the book. In one of the more interesting early chapters, Barthes dissects an aspect of Japanese food culture he describes as "Food Decentered". "Sukiyaki is a stew whose every element can be known and

recognized, since it is made in front of you, on our table, without interruption," he begins. That the ingredients, all raw, are added before the diner's makes the eating process "infintiely more exotic, more fascinating or more disgusting, because visual." The preparation is transparent. There are no hidden tricks, no "vital secrets"; there is no center to Sukiyaki. It is the same with *Sashimi,* says Barthes. The varieties of fish, each with a distinct color and tactile quality, disseminates the eye of the beholder across the tray such that attention is decentralized.

> "To select […] sometimes one color, sometimes another, depending on a kind of inspiration which appears in its slowness as the detached, indirect accompaniment of the conversation (which itself may be extremely silent)"

Thus, choosing an individual sashimi requires a certain inspiration which originates from a "detached" and "indirect" state; a place that is purely instinctual. The influence of verbal conversation here surely plays a role ('Try this one, its delicious!'), but the silent conversation — the visual exchange between subject and object, onlooker and image, diner and food, is the one where *satori* exists for Barthes. For in this exchange, language is void; it is extra-verbal. The platter of food is devoid of any marking (one is not directed by some visual technique of the chef, something that is common in western cooking). There is no inherent meaning in the dish to act as a guide; no ground to establish a foothold. As a result, any meaning that *is* derived is done so by the individual. One might say that this makes the interaction purely subjective, for the object plays no role in directing the decision of the eater. Rather the decision is made purely based on our internal biases; an intuition that bubbles up from within and inspires us to elect one colorful nugget of fish over another. Paradoxically, it is in this emptiness of meaning, in this

satori, one achieves a form of meaning most pure: in our purely subjective decision, we gain a greater understanding of ourselves.

As a visitor in a foreign country, Barthes experienced *satori* first-hand quite frequently. In fact, as Barthes did not speak Japanese, every social exchange would have been a *satori,* for each exchange would constitute an emptiness of language for both parties. Barthes says, "The unknown language, of which I nonetheless grasp the respiration, the emotive aeration, in a word the pure significance, forms around me." So in each interaction the emptiness of language is filled by the "emotive aeration": that which is communicated extra-verbally (body language, gestures, facial expressions, clothing choice etc.). Like the blind man who is more attuned to his hearing, the absence of verbal (textual) meaning makes Barthes more attuned to these extra-verbal signifiers. It also makes even the smallest interactions all the more meaningful. He says,

> To make a date may take an hour, but during that hour, for a message to be abolished in an instant if it were to be spoken, it is the other's entire body which has been known, savored, received, and which has displayed its own narrative, its own text.

So despite the lack of verbal exchange, text can be sent and received through *satori*. In contrast to verbal communication which is deliberate, discrete, and easily manipulated, *satori* constitutes an inner truth; a uniquely subjective expression. Though this possibly constitutes a more authentic communication of meaning, even Barthes acknowledges that it can result in ambiguities and verbal exchange is helpful if not necessary to mend these. "Writing is precisely the act which unites […] what could not be apprehended together in a the mere flat space of representation," he says.

A final example of a *satori*, and a particularly interesting one at that, is the Japanese poetic form, the haiku. As mentioned earlier, the haiku is the only sign to which Barthes directly mentions the notion of *satori*, and ironically it is the only one which comprises physical text. However even text can constitute an emptiness of language, and of meaning. As a form, The haiku is unique not only for its brevity but also its simplicity. Paradoxically, Barthes says "the haiku means nothing" but its intelligibility "seems to open to meaning in a particularly available, serviceable way." For Barthes a haiku is analogous to a child pointing at something and exclaiming "That!" Our attention is directed, yet the exclamation is purely indicative; it is both non-descriptive and non-defining. Barthes also compares the haiku to a note of music: "the haiku has the purity, the sphericality, and the emptiness of a note of music." Like a note of music, the haiku is atom-like; a kernel of meaning in itself at once indivisible and empty. One might say that the haiku's emptiness, its absence of inherent meaning leaves space for a subjective meaning to cultivate and grow. Barthes says that "piercing" the haiku for meaning is a fruitless endeavor; to extract meaning one must "ruminate 'until the tooth falls out'". Indeed like sashimi and extra-verbal human-human interaction, the *satori* for the haiku necessitates the conscious, analytical mind give way to the subconscious and intuitive. It seems, in a vacuum of meaning, Barthes says there is necessarily meaning. Paradoxically, *satori* seems to imply: there is no meaning; thus, there is meaning.

In a sense then, it is a bit ironic that in Empire of Signs, Barthes has an incessant pursuit of meaning. In his dense descriptions that define the emptiness of these Japanese signs, he achieves the exact opposite of the haiku. Though, I can say that I am glad he does, for his ability to capture an idea, an essence, a kernel of truth with a comprehensive description is a wonder to

behold. But even for Barthes, there are some things which simply cannot be captured with words. In “Camera Lucida”, Barthes’s reflections on photography exhibit *satori* in a sense. Though the subject of the work is certainly one of full meaning (a lack of emptiness), Barthes explores the idea of *satori* in the relation between image in text. The punctum (“that accident which pricks me”) of the photograph is not unlike those “flashes” of inspiration Barthes experiences in Japan. Barthes says the punctum “shoots out of an arrow and pierces me.” Whereas the subjects of the “flashes” Barthes experienced in Japan were empty of inherent meaning, Barthes says that many photographs may be (dangerously?) full of intended meaning. Barthes calls them myths.

> These myths obviously aim at reconciling the photograph with society by endowing it with functions which are, for the photographer so many alibis. These functions are: to inform, to represent, to surprise, to cause, to signify, to provoke desire.

Barthes encompasses these “functions” in what he calls the “studium”, that other part of the photo distinctly separate from the punctum. It is in this distinction that Barthes can abstract away the studium and all of its inherent meaning, leaving a vacuum of meaning: that crucial aspect of s*atori*. It is this place where the punctum is found, for Barthes. It is worth noting that Barthes acknowledges that the punctum is not universal. That is, two people will not necessarily (and most likely not) see the same punctum. In fact, once Barthes points out his punctum, I am inclined to include it in my studium, for it is now an aspect of the photo that is supposed to have meaning. In this way, it is only after an abstraction of meaning that our subconscious intuition can find the punctum. Indeed the punctum is the purely individual aspect of the image.

In the first half of Camera Lucida, Barthes includes many images and descriptions to accompany them. He says what the punctum and the studium is for him, and why. In short, he translates the images from visual to textual. There is one particular image however, which Barthes declines to show the reader. There is a photo of his mother as a child; "the only photograph that assuredly existed," for Barthes. In his description of the photo, evocative as it is, the reader is left to know only what the photograph means for Barthes. He talks of an "infra-knowledge" a photograph supplies; the "collection of partial objects [that] can flatter a certain fetishism." This infra-knowledge is essentially a pool from which the onlooker can grasp a punctum. In not displaying the image, and not providing the viewer access to this "infra-knowledge" Barthes ensures the image of his mother is free of any perversion by the spectator. The only meaning that can exist in association with the photograph is restricted to Barthes. His meaning is our meaning.

Like Camera Lucida, the text of Empire of Signs is accompanied by images, except the images in Empire of Signs do not correspond to the text like the do in CL. Barthes says: "The text does not 'gloss' the images, which do not 'illustrate' the text. For me, each has been no more than the onset of a kind of visual uncertainty, analogous perhaps to that *loss of meaning* Zen calls a *satori*." In some of the images I think Barthes achieves this effect better than others. For example, in the schematic image of Tokyo the viewer is naturally drawn to the vacant center of the city because that is what the text focuses on. In this case the image does very much illustrate the text. For the most part, however, I think Barthes achieves his goal of exhibiting images of pure *satori*.

It is in these images of *satori* where I see a natural foundation; a good starting place to build the notion of *satori* for all images. So it seems Barthes included these images with the intention to provide no inherent meaning. In a way, he achieves for us what is often a very difficult task: to strip an image of its studium. As such, the punctum of these images would arise in the viewer from that purely subjective intuition essential to a *satori*. In images where the studium is not stripped (i.e. nearly all images we see in the world around us), finding the punctum from a realm of *satori* is a more difficult prospect. Barthes, a trained looker at images, has the ability to perform the studium-stripping process expertly, but for the majority this is not the case. It is especially true in modern society where visually stimulating images are available in a steady digital stream at our fingertips. As a result, the digital age has conditioned us to spend little time ruminating on images and instead to make piercing snap-judgments. It is no surprise then, that image creators of today cater to the ephemeral attention span that constitutes society as a whole. Images are packed full of meaning, both the easily accessible and deeper, hidden, inverted kinds. One might say that these images are very objective: they cater to concrete preexisting notions (sexuality? the grotesque? the novel?) in an effort to connect to the individual. This is not to say that it is impossible to find the *satori* and thus find the punctum from a subjective place of pure instinct and intuition, but as Clark would say, a certain slowness may be required. If one is to achieve the abstraction of the studium, and to enter the realm of the *satori* , one must be still, and in turn respond to an image's stillness; one must empty oneself and respond to an image's emptiness.

It is a bit ironic that visual studies is so rooted in text. Throughout the semester, images have been secondary to the text which has accompanied them. This makes sense though, for how

else would the great thinkers, who aren't particularly skilled in making images themselves, communicate to the masses their ideas about visuals? In this paper, text and image have been individually explored in relation to their emptiness — their *satori* — at great length but I think the intertwined *satori*-like relationship *between* text and image —the void that exists between the two that, like *satori,* is ungraspable — is equally important. Maybe it is just that language is not entirely sufficient to capture the essence of an image, and the "infra-knowledge" Barthes speaks of is an infinitum. This, however, is a subject for another essay. To close this essay, in the hopes it has been full of meaning, I feel it appropriate to close with a haiku about visual studies — my own little absence of meaning about a field which has been very meaningful to me.

I walked in the room

In everything I learn

I learn myself

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