MIT Student

1000 Words is Nothing:
The Photographic Present in Relation to Informational Extraction

The moment is a funny thing. It is simultaneously here, gone, and arriving shortly. We all experience it continually, yet understanding what the moment actually contains troubles the minds of philosophers and scientists alike. The information encapsulated within each moment of our existence, and the best methods by which to extract that information, have served as the topic of debate for the past several millennia. Plato, Descartes, Wordsworth, Muybridge, and Barthes have contributed to understanding the moment through the lenses of their respective fields, and it is through the these varied viewpoints' use of scientific analysis and critical interpretation that the present and photographic moments may bear be understood.

Plato was one of the first thinkers to consider the present moment as a window into the workings of the world. He hypothesized that the sensory data inputted from the present may not create an accurate representation of the structure of the universe. In his works, he delineates the true nature of an object (called a Form) from its physical appearance (known as a Particular), and hypothesized that while Forms are reality, humans are only able to interact with the Particulars that appear in their stead (*Phaedo* 37). In this way, humanity is only able to view degraded visions of reality, and the present moment is unable to reveal the actual constitution of the cosmos. For this reason, Plato argues, that "The soul of the philosopher utterly disdains the body and flees from it, seeking rather to come to be alone. (*Phaedo* 28)" Therefore, the moments we perceive prove insufficient to properly elucidate the workings of the world, leaving humanity unable to inductively comprehend natural phenomena. Plato argues that extracting information from sensory data is futile; the moment (from an informational standpoint) is useless, and knowledge can only be derived through rationalism.

This problem echoed through philosophy, and was again addressed in the 17th century by Renee Descartes. Descartes uses a separate (and far more robust) line of reasoning to arrive at his argument against using sensory information to understand the world. He states that, "How often, asleep at night, am I convinced . . . that I am here in my dressing gown, sitting by the fire, when in fact I am lying undressed in bed! . . . As I think about this more carefully, I see plainly that there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep. (*Meditations 1*)" Descartes attempts to justify his beliefs and opinions in light of this dreaming argument, but his inability to find an absolute natural cornerstone upon which to build a theory damns his search for certitude. Only able to establish his own existence, "cogito ergo sum" is the sum of seven *Meditations* worth of work. The moment, the true, unadulterated moment, appeared to be forever hidden from our purview.

Descartes's writing appeared to forever distort the moment into complete subjectivity, making any information within it undiscoverable. The fact that this essay is currently stored on a machine capable of calculating the orbits of all eight planets to an accuracy of 0.00001% , however, serves as an apparent contradiction to claims of informational ignorance. Humanity has, in spite of Descartes' remonstrations, extracted enough data from the moments it viewed to split the atom, send men to the moon, and describe the fundamental forces that govern the universe. This paradox of accomplishment in the face of uncertain information does not disprove Descartes' conclusions. Descartes remains correct that it is impossible to be sure of any specific information, but certainty is not necessary for the technological achievements of the past two millennia. By observing the natural world, finding correlations, and analyzing empirical evidence, the imperfect data sets gathered through our interactions with the visible world have

allowed for these feats. Science embraces the precept of incompleteness, tames the ambiguities of the moment, and forms the provisional truths that allow for all that man has created.

Science's ideas on empiricism did not come without its detractors. The latter half of the 18th century contained a movement that fought against the deductive concepts of the scientific method. Known as the Romantic period, those involved fought against the idea of analyzing and quantifying all of the natural world ("Romantics"). The Romantics argue that the objectification of the moment removes its inherent wonder; raw, unfiltered emotion is the best method to acquire knowledge. William Wordsworth exemplifies the mindset in his poem "The Tables Turned." In it, Wordsworth argues for the reader to "quit your books" and cease attempting to extract information via logical deductions and observation. Instead, he contends that interacting with nature "may teach more of man . . . than all the sages can." He questions humankind's intellectual ability to understand the moment via reasoning alone. According to Wordsworth, "[nature] has a world of ready wealth,/Our minds and hearts to bless--/Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health/ Truth breathed by cheerfulness." Nature spontaneously transfers information when viewed; the moment need not be analyzed, only experienced, in order to learn. The raw emotive force arising from communing with nature is, in Wordsworth's opinion, enough to inform. Wordsworth claims "Our Meddling intellect/Mis-Shapes the beauteous forms of things ("The Tables Turned")." He fights against what he feels is the corruptive force of science and empiricism on the inherent beauty of the world, and argues that the present moment need not by analyzed to be appreciated.

Many of the Romantic notions of discovery in the moment are paralleled in the writings of Roland Barthes. In his essay "Camera Lucida," Barthes elucidates the method by which he analyzes a photograph for meaning. He begins by establishing two separate properties inherent

to photographs, known as the studium and punctum (*Camera Lucida 27)*. The first is the overall impression that the photograph imparts to the viewer. Much like the "vernal wood" of Wordsworth, this impression serves as a necessary backdrop for the understanding of the photograph. Unlike nature, however, the studium requires that the viewer bring preconceived notions to the photograph. Barthes makes clear that the studium serves as an "extension of a field, which I perceive quite familiarly as a consequence of my knowledge, my culture (*Camera Lucida 26).*" It is only through this previously-held information that Barthes is able to decode the information within the photograph, and bring to life the moment captured on camera. This integration of information with the photographic medium produces the overall initial impression for the viewer, and serves as the first "moment" of interacting with the work.

Barthes then describes his conception of the punctum. Resonating perfectly with the Romantic conceptions of intuition, he states that "it is not I who seek it out. It is the element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces it to me (*Camera Lucida 28).*" The punctum is a raw emotive response to the photographic stimulus; it requires no previous knowledge, and forces its presence upon the viewer. It is the same "spontaneous wisdom" that Wordsworth praises. It is the punctum that Barthes describes as being necessary for a photograph to truly touch him, and it is the punctum that forces the attention of the viewer. It is the interactions of these two elements, that allows for the extraction of emotional meaning from photography.

The empiricists are not without their own champions in photography. As Marta Braun explains in *Beauty of Another Order*, scientists were quick to utilize photography as a method of data extraction, since this "instantaneous photography of moving objects established a world that is unavailable to our vision—a world beyond the reach of our senses (*Beauty 150).*" For the first

time, dynamic systems could be frozen in time and inspected, allowing for the elucidation of previously unknown mechanics. It is by this method Edward Muybridge established that, during galloping, horses at one point have all four hooves on the ground, and Étienne-Jules Marey photographed the progression of avian flight (*Beauty of Another Order 154).* The photographic moment therefore also can contain physically relevant data; just like the present moment, the photograph moment yields insights into the interactions of the world.

Describing, analyzing, and quantifying the moment has led to the perpetual frustration of those attempting the feat. Plato rejected the sensory present entirely, Descartes showed the impossibility of certainty in those same sensory inputs, science demonstrated the power of accepting that ambiguity, and the romanticism challenged science's hold on discovering meaning in the moment. The photographic present mirrors these complications; photography illuminates previously undiscovered physical phenomena just as well as it can produce an emotional response from its viewers. The current informational valuation of a picture at 1000 words is an understatement; the photographic moment, just like the present moment, is able to yield information about the world we inhabit, and serves to increase our understanding of both ourselves and the world around us.

Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida.* New York: The Noonday Press, 1981.

Braun, Marta. *Beauty of another Order: Photography in Science.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

Descartes, Renee. *Meditations on First Philosophy.* Ed. Louis Pojman, *Classics of Philosophy 2nd Ed.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Plato. *Phaedo.* Ed. Louis Pojman, *Classics of Philosophy 2nd Ed.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Schwartz, Robert. "The Romantic Era." Mount Holyoke College. 2 December 2010. <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/courses/rschwart/hist255/jkr/romanticism.html>.

21L.325 Small Wonders: Media, Modernity, and the Moment: Experiments in Time
Fall 2010