Modern American Grotesque
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For visual and literary media alike the modern grotesque is primarily depictive, descriptive, and reflexive rather than narrative in its strategies and reception. In favoring description over narration, the visible over the recounted, and self-reference over objective perspective, modes of the grotesque since Edgar Allan Poe participate centrally in the modernist movement. Reactions against modernism, in their turn, commonly censure the movement’s reliance on just such descriptive, objectivist, and inwardly focused techniques. Condemnation from the Left attributes many of the aesthetic and political failures of modernism specifically to its grotesque and “camera eye” features. To better understand the grotesque, a consideration of modernism and photographic properties is in order at this stage. An effective place to begin is with these political condemnations.

A speaker at the Soviet Writers’ Conference of 1934 condemned James Joyce’s *Ulysses* as “a heap of dung, crawling with worms, photographed by a cinema apparatus through a microscope.”¹ The rejection of literary modernism by Marxist critic Georg Lukács, while expressed in a more sophisticated tone and reasoned in learned ways, is based upon similar analogies and it is no less severe in its conclusions. Lukács posed a choice between the rich, progressive culture of epic tradition or reactionary cultural emphases upon impermanent, surface actuality, a choice he phrased “Narrate or Describe?” in one essay. Lukács’s critique of
modernism resonates through social analyses of photography put forward by Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Susan Sontag, John Berger, and several others in the course of the twentieth century.

Lukács judges the writings of T. S. Eliot, Franz Kafka, William Faulkner, and Samuel Beckett to be alike in a dependence upon “descriptive detail . . . of extraordinary immediacy and authenticity” and alike in a consequent attenuation of reality and loss of meaning. A hypertrophy of such details in literature is for Lukács symptomatic: “Description is the writer’s substitute for the epic significance that has been lost.” And modernist description is indiscriminate in its acceptance of mundane details as fully representative of human existence, whereas epic subordinates and integrates description through an aesthetic totality of story content and plot. With the exception of epic novelists like Balzac, Tolstoi, and Thomas Mann, fiction in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in this critic’s view became largely the domain of literary specialists who authored works restricted and distorted by emphases on stylistic techniques, subjective perspectives, and surface appearances in the social world. Lukács singles out Poe as an early exponent of such stylistic specialization. With Poe and those he influenced, like Baudelaire, the style consists entirely in “lyric impressionism” expressive of “their own subjectivity, their own personal impressions and purely individual problems of creative expression with profound conviction and paradoxical bravado.” Such concentration on psychological sensations and heightened rhetorical effects produces a deformed worldview.

The medium of photography has contributed greatly to modernist aesthetics, and the critiques of photography and modernism serve to place in sharp outline properties important to a discussion of the modern grotesque. The issues raised in these critiques are directly relevant since the present study argues that in visual art and literature alike the grotesque is, by far, more a way of describing than it is a way of telling.

**NARRATE OR DESCRIBE?**

Lukács expounds the main ideas of “Narrate or Describe?” (1936) through cognate terms in his essays “Healthy or Sick Art?” (1930s) and “Franz Kafka or Thomas Mann?” (1957), in which the polarity narration/description echoes through a host of cultural alternatives and value judgments. Here, it will suffice to enumerate the most prominent correlations:
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Lukács identifies a cultural crisis within modern Western literature—even within the socialist sphere—that results when description, originally one of several subordinate modes within the epic, predominates in literary form and thus destroys any opportunity to represent the deep social structures to human experience, which only epic narration can render. Formalist description reduces everything within fiction’s purview—society, characters, and objects alike—to the pictorial, to still lives, while an epic account is genealogical in its disclosures about social and material interrelations. During the 1920s the German dramatist Bertolt Brecht, in developing the concept of an epic theater, had delivered a similar indictment against photography as a whole on charges that the medium was in its essence descriptive and nonnarrative: “Less than at any time does a simple reproduction of reality tell us anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupp works or GEC yields almost nothing about these institutions. Reality proper has slipped into the functional. The reification of human relationships, the factory, let’s say, no longer reveals these relationships. Therefore something has actually to be constructed, something artificial, something set up.”

Walter Benjamin, whose “A Short History of Photography” (1931) contains and warrants the Brecht statement, counsels that “the caption must step in, thereby creating a photography which literalizes the relationships of life and without which photographic construction would remain stuck in the proximate.” To a substantial degree, though, Benjamin’s Marxism remains receptive to the medium of photography and to impressionist and modernist literary modes such as surrealism. He considers the work of photographer Eugène Atget, which was embraced by French surrealists, to mark a new phase in the history of visual perception, one that aligns the photograph image with “a scene of action,” and thus with narrative considerations. Benjamin reiterates this idea in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936),
where he adds: “With Atget photographs become standard evidence for historical occurrences and acquire hidden political significance.”

Over the century the dichotomy narrate/describe has had several counterparts in linguistics, the human sciences, and art criticism. In work from the 1950s linguist Roman Jakobson conceptualizes language use in terms of two primary aspects or “gravitational poles.” One aspect is that of combination and contexture, based on properties of contiguity; the other is selection and substitution, based on features of similarity. In elaborating this bipolar model, which derives in part from differentials posited originally by Ferdinand de Saussure in his general linguistics, Jakobson assigns to the aspect of combination the functions of metonymy and the predicative and to the aspect of selection the functions of metaphor and the substitutive. The first aspect or axis of language is structured by syntagmatic and diachronic relationships, the second by paradigmatic and synchronic ones. The correlations respectively to narration and to description, though not named as such, are clear. In an application of the model to literary history, Jakobson attributes to the realist movement in fiction a high development along the axis of combination and contexture and to the lyric and symbolist traditions in poetry development along the axis of selection and substitution. In Jakobson’s final estimation, the potential for meaningful communication is greater through the first axis than through the second, for it is only by combination that “a higher degree of complexity” is achieved.

Though no connection with the literary judgments of Lukács seems intended, to demonstrate high achievement through functions of combination and contexture, the syntagmatic axis, Jakobson offers examples of epic realism in Tolstoi’s fiction. The structuralist analysis of literature generally favors narrative over description. In commentary on “the reality effect” in literary realism, however, Roland Barthes has remarked “the enigmatic character of all description” when it borders on “insignificant notation . . . apparently detached from the narrative’s semiotic structure.” Such description stands largely on its own in the text, serving no predictive or predicative function, yet it is indicative of an elaborately evolved language system. In Barthes’s estimation “description appears as a kind of characteristic of the so-called higher languages, to the apparently paradoxical degree that it is justified by no finality of action or of communication.”

Within the critique of photography as essentially a descriptive, non-narrative medium, and thus inherently limited in its truth-value, the most influential voices have been those of Susan Sontag and John Berger. In Sontag’s On Photography (1977), which will come under full discus-
sion in the chapter on Diane Arbus, the critic judges the medium to exert harmful consequences upon humanity’s capacity for ethical judgments and action: “Through photographs the world becomes a series of unrelated, freestanding particles; and history, past and present, a set of anecdotes and *faits divers.* The camera makes reality atomic, manageable, and opaque. It is a view of the world which denies interconnectedness, continuity.”

For John Berger photography, to its discredit, reflects a temporality of the instantaneous exposure. By arresting time in a still image, the medium falsifies one’s experience of the world: “A photograph isolates the appearances of a disconnected instant. And in life, meaning is not instantaneous. Meaning is discovered in what connects, and cannot exist without development. Without a story, without an unfolding, there is no meaning.” This statement appears in *Another Way of Telling* (1982), a book created in collaboration with the Swiss photographer Jean Mohr with the purpose of opening the medium to new narrative possibilities. For Berger writing is the customary way through which to provide a narrative for the photograph and endow it with duration and a continuity that connects its moment from the past with the viewer’s present and with his or her sense of a future.

In other commentary, however, Berger has credited images by rare “witnessing masters” and “descriptive masters” like Paul Strand, Walker Evans, and August Sander for fulfilling the promise of photography as a democratic medium with meaningful uses and with narrative powers. To Berger’s mind some Strand photographs so deeply penetrate their subject matter that they reveal “the stream of a culture or a history which is flowing through that particular subject like blood. . . . The photographic moment for Strand is a biographical or historic moment, whose duration is ideally measured not by seconds but by its relation to a lifetime. Strand does not pursue an instant, but encourages a moment to arise as one might encourage a story to be told. . . . He turns his subjects into narrators.”

What a photograph also can provide intrinsically without words and without narrative, Berger further acknowledges, is a profound capacity at the depictive level to convey visual correspondences in the physical world and the human sphere that can achieve conceptual insight: “A photograph which achieves expressiveness . . . works dialectically: it preserves the particularity of the event recorded, and it chooses an instant when the correspondences of those particular appearances articulate a general idea” (*Telling*, 122). While his political convictions lead Berger as a critic to argue for a narrative recuperation of photography’s expres-
sivity, his passions as a creative writer nonetheless incline him toward its immediate, denotative qualities.

**SEEING AND PHOTOGRAPHY**

Properly speaking, it is not the human eye in itself that sees. Rather it is the whole human being, in whom the eye is an organ, who sees. A similar conclusion, though in a different vocabulary, was reached centuries ago by Johannes Kepler, the astronomer and a founder of the modern science of optics, when he postulated that the human eye is directed by reason. Visual perception is a combined activity of eye, brain, and body; it is not the result of a mechanical act of copying or recording, as is possible through a camera and in a photograph.\textsuperscript{14} James Gibson, a contemporary scientist of sense perception, has warned: “It is misleading enough to compare the eye with a camera, but it is even worse to compare the retina with a photographic film.”\textsuperscript{15} Early and late, nonetheless, mechanistic correlations of eye to camera and retina to film have persisted in cultural commentary on photography as a medium. Little more than two decades after its invention Oliver Wendell Holmes celebrated photography’s faithful reproduction and preservation of human vision in a series of articles where he designated the plate film surface located behind the camera lens an “unfading artificial retina.”\textsuperscript{16} Even a critical mind as sophisticated as that of Arthur Danto can lapse into the lens-eye fallacy: “It is widely appreciated that the camera is a sort of detached eye, the mechanisms of which are analogous to the mechanisms of the human eye. And it is a natural extension of the language of the eye as a mechanical system that photographic images should be thought of as analogous to optical images, images that impose themselves on the retina, which cannot help but register what is seen.”\textsuperscript{17}

According to broadly accepted scientific findings, however, the retina should be considered to be a light-sensitive extension of the brain that at an early stage in human development became physically separated from the brain itself. It has been demonstrated in the laboratory that the retina contains typical brain cells as well as specialized light- and color-sensitive receptor cells.\textsuperscript{18} As further demonstration of integral connections between eye and brain, it is known that significant cognitive processing of perceptual information first takes place within the eye.

The reception of visual information in the retina entails neural mapping. In the retina there are two specialized kinds of light-receptor cells, rods and cones, named after the physical shape of their appearance under
a microscope. Rods provide vision only in shades of gray, and they function mainly in conditions of low illumination. Cones, which enable color vision, function in daylight conditions. Near the edges of the retina there are very few cones and there is no color vision, only the detection of forms in shadow. The impressions formed by light on the retina through rods and cones are not equivalent, however, to what we see. A retinal impression is just one stage in a succession of events that make up the process of seeing. As Maurice Pirenne explains: “The eye is the only optical instrument which forms an image which has never been intended to be seen. This is the great difference between the eye and the photographic camera.” That is to say, visual perception is not mechanical, the organs of vision are not equivalent to simple optical devices.

Elaborate analogies of the eye to a camera mechanism are even more ill-founded. The human eye does not “take” instantaneous still exposures, it does not contain a shutter. Vision is a kinetic process instead of a receptive or retentive reflex based in biomechanics. Vision is guided by brain and physiology and conducted through a complex of neural functions and a set of simplifying rules of cognition. The eye is never in fact static, it never arrests one image nor rests upon a single point of focus. The eye constantly scans in order to bring sights to the fovea and activate the receptors that convert that information into neuroelectric signals. Vision does not function as a storehouse for discrete, framed, solitary images.

Of course, under normal circumstances the eye does not function alone; it has a companion and vision is binocular. In the waking state the eyes continuously make small movements known as saccades, a French term that means literally “jerk” or “twitch.” The activity of saccades was discovered in the 1870s by Emile Javal. These darting movements of the eyes occur in fractions of a second; the period of rest between saccades is less than a second. In addition to larger movements intended to direct one’s gaze, saccades serve to sweep optical impressions over the retina’s photoreceptors. While the eyes constantly scan a field of vision, for the purposes of discernment they must be selective in their range of attention and focus in terms of both panoramic extent and depth of field. In practice, whole contexts of background, foreground, or periphery are left out of meaningful view as the eye draws into attention its objects of interest. The camera lens by itself, on the other hand, is not particularly discerning or selective. Up to its optical capacities, which in contemporary technology are great indeed, the lens admits all the available light reflected from the surfaces of everything within its field of view. The range of perspective and focus in a camera lens is determined by its
design, and it is fixed in relation to other camera settings.

E. H. Gombrich has adopted findings from the science of visual perception to account for “the beholder’s share” in responding to a still image. Gombrich proceeds from a general principle that there is no natural, given correlation between the world received or recorded optically and the world of a person’s visual experience. Perception is an activity of the eyes and consciousness; it is an active looking for something of interest and meaning in the visual field. The movement of vision and consciousness across a sight “always assists in confirming or refuting our provisional interpretations and anticipations.” Photography makes particularly evident one aspect of the process crucial for the artist: “Though the snapshot has transformed the portrait it has also made us see the problem of likeness more clearly than past centuries were able to formulate it. It has drawn attention to the paradox of capturing life in a still, of freezing the play of features in an arrested moment of which we may never be aware in the flux of events.”

The portrait artist strives to activate the audience’s habits of vision so that the artwork may give an animated impression of its still subject.

To say that photography is a visual medium really goes without saying. What needs to be said nonetheless is that photography is a medium of the visible consolidated within a frame and within a moment. Vision is the human being’s most complex sense faculty. The wit of Oscar Wilde puts the matter concisely: “It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.” Scientists estimate that a normally sighted person can perceive up to ten million shades and intensities of color. A black and white medium thus involves a great reduction in the capacities of visual perception. In color or not, a photograph provides a second order of the visible. A photograph’s frame and composition filters and reduces much of the world’s ordinary, distracting multiplicity. Such reductions enable consciousness, on the part of the beholder, to expand upon a few of the world’s particulars by way of visual perception. A product of the instantaneous, the photograph achieves duration each time a person views that particular photograph image. Viewing is an act of seeing that has its own temporality and its own mental scene.

In another respect, photographs are now so fully and inseparably a part of lived reality that they are phenomena in their own right, irrespective of any particular content. What we can see specifically in a photograph, in addition to its objective content, is a purposeful, motivated act of looking or construction of a sight on the photographer’s part. And since we are engaged in an analogous act, the process is never delimited
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by the photographer’s intentionality. Photography has fostered activities and habits of looking that possess their own norms. The medium influences as well one’s senses of significance within fields of vision beyond those contained within photographs themselves. At this stage in cultural history, photography has the power to help shape one’s general frame of reference, both visually and conceptually.

**DEPICTION, DESCRIPTION**

In the course of everyday experience amidst all the visual stimuli and media material that permeates the contemporary social environment, it remains for most of us uncommon in a given day to hold one’s attention steadfastly upon and face fully a select portion of the world, or even to do so with a portion that has been made fast, depicted, framed, and made available through a photograph. The photograph that arrests one’s attention, that induces one to stop and reflect upon it singularly, amidst the incessant passing show of sights and images in everyday life, has activated not only one’s faculties of perception and consciousness but one’s potential for imaginative connection in the world. Irrespective of specific subject matter, in looking at a photograph one also beholds a unique set of optical properties—fixed focus, unvaried depth of field, picture borders, and the transcription of atmospheric appearances through color or black and white processing. In a consideration of “thinking through photography” Patrick Maynard suggests that we approach the medium as one of the modern age’s “depictive technologies.” Rather than offering a direct view of its contents, “photography provides methods of marking surfaces that entice imagining.”

Photography holds a moment still. The momentary, nonnarrative quality of a photograph should be welcomed, I think, for the unique perceptual advantage its gives over the multitudinous rush of everyday reality, which of course includes its own flux of images. The French documentarian and portraitist Marc Riboud has said of photographers: “We aren’t creators, we’re interpreters.” And it is in this role that mastery has been achieved by many photographers whose work can be understood as a practice of “thick description,” to adopt a concept fundamental to the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Through the mode of thick description, according to Geertz, an ethnographic account interjoins observations of the strata and hierarchies of meaning within a culture with indications of the “structures of inference and implication”
on the observer’s own part. In other words, the activities of gathering information and making observations in the field are compounded with the activities of organizing and constructing this material into an ethnographic study. Interpretation is not held in reserve until all fieldwork is done, rather interpretation is all along an inseparable part of the process of observation. As one consequence the ethnographer relinquishes any pretensions to complete objectivity or comprehensive knowledge of another culture. The fitting scale for the findings in an ethnography is rather on the order of “local truths” in all their “complex specificness [and] their circumstantiality.” Such a procedure gives full measure to paradigmatic and descriptive considerations in the human sciences and defers any promise of syntagmatic or narrative totality. At a terminological and methodological level, it should be acknowledged, Geertz denigrates the “I-am-a-camera, ‘phenomenalistic’” approach to field observation and cautions that symbolic action is often “unphotographable.” Nonetheless, it still can be said that a photograph that arrests a viewer’s attention possesses a quality of descriptive thickness. And such a photograph can function as a kind of ethnographic datum from the viewer’s own culture, from that of others, and from the encounter of the two.

A descriptive rationale is prominent within modern American photography, from the work of Paul Strand early in the twentieth century through that of Diane Arbus in the 1960s. The snapshot camera vision of Robert Frank, Garry Winogrand, Tod Papageorge, and others is a related approach, but one that makes no explicit demonstrations of mastery in composition or darkroom technique. In a statement from the 1970s on the medium, Winogrand generalized: “Literal description, or the illusion of literal description, is what . . . still photography do[es] better than any other graphic medium.” Additionally Winogrand explained, now famously, “I photograph to see what things look like photographed.” On another occasion he defined the essence of photography as a process of “Perception (seeing) and Description (operating the camera to make a record) of the seeing.” In pointed contradiction to Henri Cartier-Bresson’s ideal of the decisive moment and its inherent story structure, Winogrand contended that “No one moment is most important. Any moment can be something.” Starting from shared premises yet reaching energetic conclusions instead of Winogrand’s often rather deadpan ones, Tod Papageorge believes that “photography investigates no deeper relief than surfaces. It is superficial, in the first sense of the word; it studies the shape and skin of things, that which can
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be seen. By a passionate extension of this, its most profound meanings have to do with immanence, the indwelling grace of what Zen calls our ten thousand facts.”

A photograph depiction is an opportune ground for phenomenological description. To take a small liberty without I think taking great license, a photograph depiction can be likened to the bracketing (epoché) of the world important to procedures in phenomenology for a description of the interactions of consciousness and external reality, and through such description comes knowledge. Phenomenological contexts for a consideration of photography first gained prominence in the area of film theory and interpretation, most notably in the writings of André Bazin and Stanley Cavell. Bazin, for one, starts from a premise of complete phenomenal equivalence: “The photographic image is the object itself. . . . The photograph as such and the object in itself share a common being.” Cavell initially utilizes a similar premise in stating “A photograph is of reality or nature.” His “ontology” of the image also registers, however, a property of exclusion within a photograph’s framed portion of reality: “The implied presence of the rest of the world, and its explicit rejection, are as essential in the experience of a photograph as what it explicitly presents.” For both Bazin and Cavell the still image is of interest principally as a technical basis for motion picture photography, and their main concern is with film shots along axes of syntagmatic relations. Their commentary leaves unexplored the paradigmatic and descriptive potentials of the single photograph image.

Siegfried Kracauer has also made claims for the presence of physical reality within photograph images when the images are sequenced into motion pictures. In early commentary on still photography, from the 1920s, Kracauer assesses the appearance of reality offered by the mode to be “mere surface coherence” limited to a depictive function: “In photography the spatial appearance of an object is its meaning.” Kracauer places cultural priority instead on “historicism,” which depends upon a “complete mirroring of a temporal sequence” and whose ideal medium would be “a giant film depicting the temporally interconnected events from every vantage point.” For Kracauer stillness in the photograph image is an impediment.

A practice of phenomenology for inquiry into still photography has been most seriously pursued by Norton Batkin and by Roland Barthes. Batkin’s expository method is that of ordinary language philosophy, largely under the influence of Stanley Cavell and specifically through the kinds of questions viewing a photograph raises and the kinds of discourse that suggest possible answers or at least, where no answers are
forthcoming, possible responses. Batkin maintains that the photographs that matter to an individual are limited to those that each of us regards through *intentionality*. In this, he applies the principle fundamental to phenomenology that the relationship of consciousness to reality is *intentional*, that acts of consciousness point beyond themselves to the external world, that experience involves perceptions of reality, outside consciousness. Every mental act is “about” or “of” an object. The object need not be actual; it can be irreal, such as a dream image. By function, consciousness always apprehends something, it is directed elsewhere. In turn, the outside world is structured in ways receptive to consciousness; it points reciprocally to acts of consciousness intended toward the outside world.33 On matters of temporality, Batkin insists that the “moment” of a photograph is marked by an absence of anything preceding or following: “One way to note the fact of stillness, the fact that photographs are still, is to note that photographs have no before and after.” Though Batkin does not use the terminology, his account of the experience of viewing a photograph operates as a phenomenological description that sets aside any issues of duration and narrativity. Where photography has to do with philosophy is in questions and qualities of stillness. And these can lead to an apprehension of the unity of consciousness and world: “The fact of a photograph’s stillness . . . [is] the fact of sight, the fact of a world altogether.”34 His study’s concluding section discusses the work of Paul Strand largely in such terms.

The book on photography, *La chambre claire* (1980) by Roland Barthes, translated as *Camera Lucida*, has been broadly influential. Its methods appropriate aspects of the project and language of phenomenology albeit, Barthes advises, “it was a vague, casual, even cynical phenomenology, so readily did it agree to distort or to evade its principles according to the whim of my analysis.”35 While Barthes’s ideas warrant consideration here on the basis of their prominence within the study of photography, as an application of phenomenology they do not serve the purposes of the present study for reasons that become quickly apparent. The appropriation is also “cynical” in that Barthes knowingly violates fundamentals of “classical phenomenology, the kind I had known in adolescence (and there has not been any other since)” (*Camera Lucida*, 21). The specific tradition at issue here is the transcendental idealism of Edmund Husserl.

*Camera Lucida* is dedicated to Jean-Paul Sartre’s 1940 study *L’imaginaire: psychologie-phénoménologique de l’imagination* (translated into English as *The Psychology of Imagination*). There, Sartre breaks from Husserl’s construct of a transcendental Ego. The most important influence upon
Barthes from the Sartre book comes through its investigations into the existential problem of the image. Basic to understanding imagination as an act of consciousness, Sartre maintains, is the premise that perception is a greater faculty than vision: “I always perceive more and otherwise than I see.” Intentionality supplies perception with a fullness and heterogeneity that vision alone does not possess. Through actions of consciousness an “image is built up by the intention, which compensates for its [i.e. the image’s] shortcomings as a perception” (Imagination, 41). At an initial level of vision, Sartre explains, “the photograph is but a paper rectangle of a special quality and color, with shadows and white spots distributed in a certain fashion” (Imagination, 24). To apprehend the photograph consciousness mobilizes “a certain intention, the one that turns it [i.e., the photograph] into an image,” into an object grasped by one’s imaginative faculty (Imagination, 25).

Not all photographs enter the consciousness of a beholder fully as an image. Most photographs in fact do not, and Barthes designates their limited level of interest to imagination to be the studium of photography, “that very wide field of unconcerned desire, of various interest, of inconsequential taste” (Camera Lucida, 27). Another break from transcendental principle by Barthes results from an unwillingness to submit his feelings in relation to certain photographs to the epoché or phenomenological reduction. Barthes prefers instead to indulge in narcissistic intentionality in relation to his chosen images. The chief affect involved in such intentionality, as Barthes soon makes plain, constellates desire and grief. It is a desire for consciousness borne of mourning, specifically over the loss of his mother.

Seeing a photograph phenomenologically is for Barthes a matter of agonized, romantic recognition of loss. For him, the medium’s capacity to evoke pathos arises from its lack of any real depth in space or time: “With the Photograph, we enter into flat Death. . . . The Photograph is a certain but fugitive testimony; so that everything, today, prepares our race for this impotence: to be no longer able to conceive duration, affectively or symbolically” (Camera Lucida, 92–93). This assertion identifies the modality of the photograph as depictive, with a corollary loss to any narrative meaning. Barthes’s understanding of photographic depiction does not entail the deeply structured integration of consciousness and world through perception that the process of description in classical phenomenology seeks. In another interview Barthes explained: “Each perception and reading of a photo is implicitly, in a repressed manner, a contact with what has ceased to exist, a contact with death. I think that
this is the way to approach the photographic enigma, at least that is how I experience photography: as a fascinating and funereal enigma." Barthes elaborates the enigma in *Camera Lucida* by contemplating photographs that seem to invite his aggrieved intentionality and that thus can be classified by the quality he designates as *punctum*—“this wound, this prick, this mark” that “rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me” (*Camera Lucida*, 26). The underlying power of its poignancy is experienced by Barthes consistently as the sensation that its subject seems already dead, apart from any consideration of that person’s continued existence, and in this Barthes encounters being in an “anterior future” imperative mode, as the “imperious sign of . . . future death” (*Camera Lucida*, 96, 97).

In the transcendental phenomenology of Husserl consciousness is able to engage the world directly only after exercising the *epoché*, a suspension or bracketing of cultural assumptions, personal values, and empirical knowledge about phenomena. Barthes’s practices are anything but dispassionate or transcendent. Yet, with ironic impertinence he explains them as a kind of *epoché*: “I am a primitive, a child—or a maniac; I dismiss all knowledge, all culture, I refuse to inherit anything from another eye than my own” (*Camera Lucida*, 51). *Camera Lucida* is a work of mourning, and its ideas on the temporality of photography are shaped to serve that intention. The *punctum* of a photograph involves a “lacerating emphasis” upon “Time,” whose “pure representation” is in the conjugation “that-has-been” (“ça-a-été” in the original French) (*Camera Lucida*, 96). A beholder’s perception of the photographed subject is bound within this tense form and an immutable calculus of time: “By giving me the absolute past of the pose . . . the photograph tells me death in the future” (*Camera Lucida*, 96). The study’s perspective on its subject is that of a traumatized consciousness. In closing, Barthes reconstructs his motivation for writing it as a scene of romantic anguish and mania: “I entered crazily into the spectacle, into the image, taking into my arms what is dead, what is going to die” (*Camera Lucida*, 117). The duration of exposition in *Camera Lucida* is thus marked by submission to a belief that all that is meaningful has been, is, or will be past. In these circumstances Barthes is left external, extraneous, to the present and bereft of any future, even an immediate one, other than that marked by mortality, a prospect that is already past. The master narrative of *Camera Lucida*, and of photography itself in Barthes’s view, is death. Phenomenology in its own right, on the other hand, generally operates elsewhere, amidst the living.
A DESCRIPTIVE APPROACH

Despite a near consensus in contemporary academic discourse against suggestions of any lasting or reliable truth in the matter, I think each of us will admit personally to the unique perceptual and contemplative effect some photographs have in the course of our lives. And phenomenology can offer explanations for the power an image can have within consciousness. To the question “What is phenomenology?” that inaugurates his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty begins to answer with the explanation that it is a philosophy that “tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is, without taking account of its psychological origin and the causal explanations which the scientist, the historian or the sociologist may be able to provide.” Description thus stands at the forefront of the phenomenological project, as Merleau-Ponty reiterates: “It is a matter of describing, not of explaining or analyzing” (*Phenomenology*, viii). Perception and description, as acts of consciousness, are humanity’s primary means of “access to truth” (*Phenomenology*, xvi). In a perceptual approach, a person’s experience of the world is inseparable from the person’s description of the world, and thus a phenomenological description has in view both the *entities and phenomena* as one experiences them and one’s *experience of entities and phenomena*. This approach answers a fundamental challenge to knowledge, for “nothing is more difficult to know than precisely what we see” (*Phenomenology*, 58).

For Merleau-Ponty an unprejudiced description of one’s perception and experience of the world reveals the basis of human existence. A person’s experience of the world is of necessity perspectival. Moreover, perception and consciousness *embody* experience for a person. In other writings Merleau-Ponty explains that the role of phenomenology “consists not in stringing concepts together but in describing the mingling of consciousness with the world, its involvement in a body, and its coexistence with others.” Moreover, “phenomenological or existential philosophy is largely an expression of surprise at [the] inherence of the self in the world and in others, a description of this paradox and permutation, and an attempt to make us see the bond between subject and world, between subject and others, rather than to explain it as the classical philosophies did by resorting to absolute spirit.” It is not a purpose here to reconcile or overcome differences between the practices of phenomenology identified as transcendental and associated with Husserl versus those identified as existential and associated with Merleau-Ponty. An operation of the *epoché* or reduction posited by Husserl is accepted by
Merleau-Ponty insofar as it is necessary to free consciousness from attitudes that presume truths about the world prior to one’s experience of the world. Merleau-Ponty does not incorporate into his phenomenology, however, the eidetic epoché that became paramount to Husserl, who explained the transcendental project as follows: consciousness “can be purged of every empirical and psycho-physical element, but, being so purged, it cannot deal with ‘matters of fact.’ Any closed field may be considered as regards its ‘essence’ . . . and we may disregard the factual side of our phenomena, and use them as ‘examples’ merely. We shall ignore individual souls and societies, to learn their a priori, their ‘possible’ forms.”41 Phenomenology for Merleau-Ponty, to the contrary, “does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their ‘facticity’” (Phenomenology, vii). The process does not remain, however, at a level of facticity: “The phenomenological world is not the bringing to explicit expression of a pre-existent being, but a laying down of being. . . . [It is] like art, the act of bringing truth into being” (Phenomenology, xx).

To make the argument that embodied consciousness synthesizes sense perceptions like sound, touch, and sight into an experience of the totality of an object or a phenomenon, Merleau-Ponty elaborates an analogy to the complex coordination involved in binocular vision and the perception of a single image that results. Of all the senses, he posits the one most “capable of objectivity and accessible to intentionality” to be vision, and it predominates in our perceptual involvement with the world. Merleau-Ponty accepts “the taking over of sensory experiences in general in visual experience” as a general truth (Phenomenology, 234 n1). While it is true that Merleau-Ponty’s published commentary gives precedence to vision over other modes of perceptual and cognitive activity and that his exposition of visual experience is conveyed exclusively through writing, his philosophy gives every indication that language is adequate to the responsibilities of phenomenological description.42

To Merleau-Ponty’s way of thinking expressive modes, regardless of the specific medium, have much in common as phenomena: “A novel, poem, picture or musical work are individuals, that is, beings in which the expression is indistinguishable from the thing expressed, their meaning accessible only through direct contact, being radiated with no change of their temporal and spatial situation. It is in this sense that our body is comparable to a work of art. It is a nexus of living meanings” (Phenomenology, 151). In his concept of “the prose of the world,” language “contains its own ebbing, it own rule of usage and vision
of the world,” and great literature “introduces us to new experiences and to perspectives that can never be ours, so that in the end language destroys our prejudices.” Reading is an activity that involves vision, yet it transports the reader into realms of the invisible: “The wonderful thing about language is that it promotes its own oblivion: my eyes follow the lines on the paper, and from the moment I am caught up in their meaning I lose sight of them. The paper, the letters on it, my eyes and body are there only as the minimum setting of some invisible operation” (Phenomenology, 401). With an echo of Oscar Wilde that would surprise the both of them, Merleau-Ponty explains the experience of invisibility evoked within consciousness by means of the visible as an “invisible of this world, that which inhabits this world, sustains it, renders it visible, its own and interior possibility, the Being of this being.” It is in this connection that he cites the image, devised by Paul Valéry, of a secret blackness of milk detectable only through its whiteness.

The application of phenomenology is far more developed in the study of literature than it is in the study of photography. The range of specific approaches to literature varies widely. Rather than rehearse some of the philosophical varieties, however, it will be more effective to conclude with two examples of phenomenology possible in literature articulated from within literature itself, one by Wallace Stevens, a poet laureate of the imaginative faculties, the second by Joseph Conrad, a master of the novel of consciousness. In “Note on Moonlight” Stevens contemplates prospects simplified into darks and lights:

The one moonlight, in the simple-colored night,
Like a plain poet revolving in his mind
The sameness of his various universe,
Shines on the mere objectiveness of things.

Stevens draws a necessary connection among the world, human beings, and the visible:

It is as if being was to be observed,
As if, among the possible purposes
Of what one sees, the purpose that comes first,
The surface, is the purpose to be seen.

The connection embodies an intentionality that is appropriately considered existential and phenomenological:
The one moonlight, the various universe, intended
So much just to be seen—a purpose, empty
Perhaps, absurd perhaps, but at least a purpose,
Certain and ever more fresh.46

Visibility or its depiction alone, either will suffice, is sufficient to constitute being.

In the preface to one of his tales, Conrad says of literary art in general that “it may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect.”47 And such truth extends into domains not visible in themselves: its “appeal is made to our less obvious capacities: to that part of our nature which, because of the warlike conditions of existence, is necessarily kept out of sight within the more resisting and hard qualities.” Moreover, “such an appeal, to be effective, must be an impression conveyed through the senses; and, in fact, it cannot be made in any other way.” While Conrad created indelible grotesque characterizations, as with the young Russian clad in motley and Mr. Kurtz of Heart of Darkness (1902) and the revolutionists Mr. Verloc and Michaelis of The Secret Agent (1907), more importantly, his explanation of the novelist’s art is suggestive of the processes of adumbration and elucidation essential to visual and literary traditions of the grotesque. Conrad reaches a conclusion that has become canonical: “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see. That—and no more, and it is everything.” His amplification of the credo also warrants quotation: “The task approached in tenderness and faith is to hold up unquestioningly, without choice and without fear, the rescued fragment before all eyes” and to “disclose its inspiring secret: the stress and passion, within the core of each convincing moment.” If achieved “the presented vision of regret or pity, of terror or mirth, shall awaken in the hearts of the beholders that feeling of unavoidable solidarity, . . . which binds men to each other and all mankind to the visible world.”

The ideas on perception, the visible, invisibility, intentionality, and the complete moment that Stevens and Conrad express are all consonant with the practices of description crucial in a phenomenological response to the world. And, to reiterate, the modern grotesque is often graphic and descriptive—as against conceptual or narrative—in its means. Modernist impulses complicate the grotesque through compound reflexive
uses of visualized description. A descriptive approach thus seems particularly well suited to an analysis of the grotesque in both literary and pictorial forms as an expression of modern culture. The present study undertakes the project in the spirit of phenomenology. Our daily experiences as readers and observers, free from any master narrative or dominant ideology within us or within our world, offer powerful vantages upon being.