

**Representing the Unrepresentable:
Barthes and the Subversive Understanding
of Visual Media**

by
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Introduction

The critique of visual art has always consisted of a fallacy of translation: to put into linguistic context that which was meant to exist outside of language. Most of our existence can be put into words for we live within our language, we think through our words and communicate through arbitrary symbols. But how much of our existence is missed by linguistic constructs and goes unrepresented? Is what is unrepresented inexistent? Where language fails, art intercedes. It is the unique ability of art to represent the mysteries that defy linguistic restraints and present the unexpected, the unrepresented. Roland Barthes presents film as the only medium which can contain this indefinable quality, and yet it is found elsewhere, in photography, painting, and in the very nature of humanity whose potential we strive to realize.

Roland Barthes and the Third Meaning in Film

In his essay, *The Third Meaning*, Roland Barthes describes three levels of meaning which exist in film, even though all three might not, and rarely are, present at all times. The first level of meaning, Barthes calls the informational level. At this level, the film reveals the basic message of the story; who are the characters, what is their relation, what is the setting, and what is taking place. He uses as an example a still from Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (see image I) in which two courtiers pour gold pieces over the head of the unaffected young czar. At the informational level, we absorb what was just described: the setting, the characters, the action, the expression. We understand it as part of the story and what will get us from the previous scene to the following scene.

The second level for Barthes is the symbolic level. We know what is happening in the scene from the informational level but what is the deeper significance behind the objects and actions we see? Gold is a sign of wealth. The pouring over the head signifies an act of baptism of the new czar, but a baptism of and by wealth and greed. In its action, this baptism does not cleanse the figure of the czar but seems to distort and hide his identity. The informational and symbolic are always diegetic, even if indirectly and with controversial significance. For instance, the signified phallus is an ever recurring symbol throughout the films of Hitchcock and exists whether or not the viewer validates it. One may dispute the idea that the cane that Jimmy Stewart's character uses in *Vertigo* is a phallic symbol, but an understanding of the cane semiotically adds depth and a new level of understanding to the character only as it pertains to the story. There is no desire to assign a statement detached from the diegesis or theme here. The informational level and symbolic level fall under one umbrella of intentional communication which Barthes calls the obvious.

For most film viewers, the symbolic level marks the depth of their conscious perception and even that can be heavily debated. But Barthes insists on a third level of meaning within film that can be objectively perceived. This next meaning, however, cannot be coded. Its home is in feeling rather than language. It is not present in nor is it concerned with the diegesis, but it lurks below, it punctures through, it hovers above the signified of the obvious. It is what he calls the obtuse. It punctures and envelopes. It is a sense of whole that comes from what is both disturbing and harmonious from the image. It is non-diegetic and yet allows us to come into complete connection and understanding with the time, the space, the characters, and our relationship to them. It is this indefinable

presence that can't be described for it is before and above description. "The obtuse meaning is not in the language system (even that of symbols)" (*The Third Meaning* p. 61) Symbols stand for something in reality. If the obtuse cannot be named, if it cannot exist in language, that is because there is nothing named that corresponds to it. It is greater than language for it is outside what we know as reality. A dyadic order of semiotics simply uses signs rather than words. The obtuse lay outside the reach of both. "If the obtuse meaning cannot be described, that is because, in contrast to the obvious meaning, it does not copy anything...the obtuse meaning is a signifier without a signified, hence the difficulty in naming it." (*The Third Meaning* p. 61) It is unable to be represented for nothing in our reality represents it. Consequently, Barthes calls this level of understanding the Third Meaning for, like what it signifies, it must go without linguistic title or inadequate description.

For Barthes, the third meaning lay in the dynamics of the seemingly uniform courtiers in the scene from *Ivan the Terrible* mentioned above. The scene is not really about these two insignificant characters and yet the color of the image comes from their opposing and incongruent traits: the thick makeup, the oafish nose, the uncaring bored manner of the one, defying the fair, distinguished, diligent manner of the other. This kind of electricity which erupts does not really affect the story in any graspable way. "Obtuse meaning is discontinuous, indifferent to the story and to the obvious meaning (as signification to the story)" (*The Third Meaning* p. 61) In fact, it is immediately understood that the scene did not have to transgress in this manner. In the level of the obvious, it could have just as easily been that the two courtiers matched each other in every way so as not to be given a second glance, and the film would go on just the same.

But it did happen that way, and that is where the magic exists. That subversive element that seizes the viewer and sparks our interest on a deeper level. That is the significance, the *signifiance*, referring to the signifier without a signified. And as quickly as it appears, it is gone from the screen, like a phantom. This is why Barthes insists that its presence can only be analyzed through stills of a film. This fleeting incidence does not consciously come from the filmmaker, and as Barthes insists, and it did not come from the viewer. It comes from a visual harmony from within the image, brought about from a certain detail which doesn't quite fit in an expected way. The unexpected disrupts the viewer and a deeper connection between image and viewer is formed. A spiritual poetry emerges which Barthes insists is not subjective but can be shared among viewers.

Barthes goes on to attempt to describe this "indescribable" presence. He gives another name to this unnamable thing and calls it the filmic. The filmic is what remains after language fails and thus can only be found in the third meaning. "The filmic is that in film which cannot be described, the representation which cannot be represented. The filmic begins only where language and metalanguage end." (*The Third Meaning* p. 64) Anything that can be described, criticized, or written about in a film falls under the obvious. For, anything we can describe with words lay within our linguistic understanding of reality. That which falls outside of representation is the obtuse or the filmic, and that is what makes film unique. Why put on film something that can just as well be written? However, Barthes gives special signification to film as the only place where the filmic, and thus, the obtuse can be found. "...The specific filmic...lies...in an inarticulable third meaning that neither the simple photograph nor figurative painting can assume since they lack the diegetic horizon..." (*The Third Meaning* p. 66) However, the

obtuse itself exists outside the diegesis, so why is the diegesis critical to the obtuse? And how does he come to the conclusion that a photograph or a painting cannot tell a story? Both can have a setting, characters, and action. They can absolutely have a story, even if it is told in part by the viewer. In fact, Barthes contradicts himself on this subject in his own writing *Camera Lucida*.

Barthes and Still Photography

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes describes two components he sees in photography. The first is the studium which is what the photographer means to portray: the location, the characters, the action, the expressions, and so forth. It relays something about the time and place of when the photograph was taken. It is a backdrop, a background. And for our concerns, it is diegetic as is the obvious. “[The studium] always refers to a classical body of information...” (*Camera Lucida* p. 25) The studium is the level of information in a photograph and thus corresponds to the informational and symbolic of the obvious in Barthes’ own film theory.

The memorable photographs, the images that stay with you long after your eyes have turned away contain a second element which Barthes calls the punctum. The punctum is that detail of the photograph which pricks and punctures through the image and to the viewer. It is the happy accident that catches the eye and won’t let go. It is the nuns who just happen to be there amongst the studium of the soldiers and the war torn surroundings in Wessing’s photograph *Nicaragua* (II). An unfamiliar and intriguing duality is present in the coexistence of the nuns who usually bring about thoughts of purity and sheltered life, within the gritty, ultra-real setting of war. Without the nuns,

without the punctum, we still receive the information of the time, place, action, and story. The presence of the nuns provides this surreal juxtaposition of characters that “rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces...” (*Camera Lucida* p. 26) Like the obtuse, the punctum’s realm is outside the diegesis of the image and the intentionality of the artist. “Certain details may prick...If they do not, it is doubtless because the photographer has put them there intentionally...Hence the detail which [is of interest] is not or at least not strictly, intentional, and probably must not be so.” (*Camera Lucida* p. 47)

Most importantly, the punctum provides the presence of depth and fulfillment. As the obtuse provides this depth to film, both striking and harmonious at once, so provides the punctum of the photograph. “There is another...expansion of the punctum: when paradoxically, while remaining a ‘detail’, it fills the whole picture.” (*Camera Lucida* p. 45) As with the obtuse, this completeness can be attributed to its pre-linguistic nature. Unlike the studium or the obvious, this feeling of completeness is sensed, or even divined in the punctum and the obtuse. It is outside what we know of reality and therefore cannot be expressed, or replaced by, symbols or words. Language comes from need, a need to communicate that one wants something it does not have. On the other hand, what is pre-linguistic, such as the obtuse and the punctum, is without need for there is total fullness, an idea which will be further explored later on. What we cannot fully grasp, what we cannot name and compartmentalize, what we cannot package and put away in our minds, what goes without representation is what is at once shocking and disturbing about these presences. “The studium is always coded, the punctum is not...What [can be named] cannot really prick...The incapacity to name is a good

symptom of disturbance.” (*Camera Lucida* p. 51) It is this disturbance which is caused by our meeting the unrepresented, the unnamed, the unknown, leaving at once fullness and emptiness, the void of signifier without a signified.

So as we see, the unnamable presence to which Barthes gives three names: the Third Meaning, the obtuse and the filmic does not exist only in film as Barthes claims, but it also exists in photography as the punctum, also named by Barthes. But if it can exist in still photography, can it not also exist in a painting? Barthes would surely deny this possibility for the thing that shocks, the thing that is unrepresented in reality which we perceive in film in the obtuse and photography in the punctum, Barthes insists should be an unintentional accident. Paint is a medium too intentional and controlled to allow such an accident. But why must it be unintentional? If we have the ability to perceive and even name this unnamable thing (four times), then can we not have the ability to create it? We are not prisoners of our language in a strict sense of linguistic relativity. Language may shape many or even most of our thoughts, but we are not completely confined to the structure of spoken language, otherwise, a third meaning could not even be negotiated. It is therefore unrealistic and very limiting to suggest that all art is created as a mere visual representation of what could be just as easily spoken or written down. The obtuse, the punctum, the unrepresented is simply the unfamiliar, it is not the impossible. Presenting the unfamiliar and putting the real world on trial was the direct aim of visual philosopher Rene Magritte.

The Mystery of Magritte

The obtuse and the punctum which lay outside reality reside in Magritte's surreal paintings and sculptures. There is a big difference in theory however. Where Barthes described two fields, the obvious and obtuse in film, and the studium and punctum in photography, Magritte's art exists solely in the unrepresentable. For him, there is no informational level, there is no symbolic, there is no studium. That is not to say that there is no reality. But what Magritte presents to us through his unexpected juxtaposition of ordinary well known objects is another reality. He presents not the real but the surreal. Magritte uses familiar objects and places them in unfamiliar surroundings and positions to remind us of what could be but isn't and asks us, or forces us to ask ourselves, why this is so. As the obtuse in a film could just as easily be otherwise, just as the two courtiers in *Ivan the Terrible* could have been perfectly uniform, Magritte's ideas remind us that what exists within our own reality could just as easily be otherwise. "[His ideas] represent nothing else than unborn realities." (Gablik p. 9)

Where the obtuse and punctum lay atop a comfortable backdrop of the understandable obvious and studium to which our minds can easily cling, there exists no such skeletal grounding in Magritte's paintings. We perceive only the unrepresentable, only the unnamable. His work defies explanation, for that lies in the realm of the linguistic, the coded, the signified. "The meaning of [his] paintings does not reside in any literary explanation or interpretation which can be offered. They are the evidence, however, of a philosophical temperament which was continually investigating and analyzing the structure of our common-sense beliefs and struggling to reconcile the paradoxes of existence." (Gablik p. 11) And where Barthes insisted that the obtuse and

the punctum be unintentional, the inner disruption caused by what Magritte called the *mystery* of an image was his full intension and his only aim. “The fear of being mystified,” according to Magritte, “applies equally to painted images which have the power to provoke...fear. Sometimes an image can place its spectator under serious accusation.” (Gablik p. 10) The mystery accuses, the punctum pierces, the obtuse strikes.

Magritte’s recurrent iconicism such as his use of the apple, the bowler-hatted man, the lost jockey, and of course the pipe, have attracted many attempts to interpret his work through symbolism. Yet symbolism falls short within the obvious, within the linguistic, within reality. Just as one cannot describe or name something that does not exist in reality, so one cannot symbolize it either. Many artists who work with imagery loathe the question, “So what are you saying with this film/photograph/painting?” If the message could just as easily be said or written, then the point of it manifested as an image is lost. The same holds true for symbolism since what can be symbolized can be said/named/described/written. Linguistics and semiotics mark the easy way out of the conundrum in which Magritte places the viewer. Magritte has written:

To equate my painting with symbolism, conscious or unconscious, is to ignore its true nature...People are quite willing to use objects without looking for any symbolic intention in them, but when they look at paintings, they can’t find any use for them. So they hunt around for a meaning to get themselves out of the quandary, and because they don’t understand what they are supposed to think when they confront the painting...They want something to lean on, so they can be comfortable. They want something secure to hang on to, so they can save themselves from the void. People who look for symbolic meanings fail to grasp the inherent poetry and mystery of the image. No doubt they sense this mystery, but they wish to get rid of it. They are afraid. By asking ‘what does this mean?’ they express a wish that everything be understandable. But if one does not reject the mystery, one has quite a different response. One asks other things. (Gablik p. 11)

Magritte continued to investigate the inadequacy and misrepresentation in symbolism and language through his series of paintings in which he juxtaposes image and word. The unrepresentable that we have discussed in film and photograph have been that of a feeling or a presence divined from a particular order of objects and images within the frame, i.e. the two opposing courtiers in *Ivan the Terrible* or the nuns' presence amongst the soldiers and rubble in a war torn Nicaragua. There, the obtuse and the punctum represent the indefinable, indescribable quality of an image that strikes us in its fullness. It is a reality where language and semiotics fall short in representation. But Magritte reduces this failure of language to single objects and their representation to make the inadequacy of language all the more obvious. In *The Use of Words I* (III), Magritte presents a painting of a pipe with the inscription below it "This is not a pipe". In doing so, he reminds us that it is indeed not a pipe but an image or representation of a pipe. Here he shows how both symbolism and language fall short and misrepresent. There is nothing pipe-like in the word 'pipe' and a painting cannot be smoked. In fact, an image of a pipe is more like an image of a boat than it is like a pipe itself. Often we take for granted and confuse the thing and the thing that represents it. We call an image of a pipe a pipe. The distinction between signifier and signified becomes blurred. The resulting confusion we generally call realism and an image of a pipe with an "improper" label shocks us because we tend to be trapped in that tyranny of arbitrary words and symbols.

Through this disruption of representing the unrepresentable, signifying the unsignified, Magritte wished to liberate thought and open the way to authentic revelation. In this way, he wanted to bring about total fulfillment from the mystery, from

(paradoxically) the void. But it is a void only to those who are afraid of embracing a reality outside of secure language. To those who do embrace it, the mystery, the obtuse, the punctum is fulfillment of a realized reality. What appears to be true because of its familiarity can be an oversimplified and limited notion of the possibilities of experience. We can progress only so far by deliberating on manifested realities. Far more can be pondered from unrealized realities. As in scientific empiricism, we learn more from the unexpected than from what is fully expected. “Only a willful disruption of the usual certainties will liberate thought and open the way to authentic revelation.” (Gablik p. 10) We progress when we are shaken, when we are punctured, not when we are comfortable in the familiar. For Magritte, these are the moments of panic which he strived to fashion for they transcend the mediocrity of coded thought. And unlike Barthes’ claim for film, this presence of initial confusion and then revelation does not exist only in paint or film or art. It can happen at any moment in life, if we are aware enough to see it, confident enough to behold it, and open enough to be moved by it.

Fantomas: The Criminal Without a Signified

Paradoxically, representing the unrepresentable can even carry over into literature. Fantomas and Maldoror were the geniuses of crime from thriller novels of the early twentieth century and heroes of Magritte and the Surrealist movement. The significance of these two characters lay not in the literary medium, for we are focusing on the pre-linguistic, but in the content. The idea of operating outside reality and the signifier existing without the signified is evident in these criminals for they seemed to operate outside reality with no concrete form, no substantial reality, almost as phantoms

(hence the name Fantomas). They moved outside of the normal contingencies of time and space and yet their presences were always felt, or rather, divined.

Even in a series of novels, Fantomas was above literary description. As the character President Bonnet proclaims in the first book, “It is impossible to say exactly what or to know who Fantomas is. He often assumes the form and personality of some particular and even well-known individual; sometimes he assumes the forms of two human beings at the same time...he is impossible to catch or identify. He is nowhere and everywhere at once, his shadow hovers above the strangest mysteries...” (*Fantomas* p. 14) Fantomas, like Maldoror, maneuvers and even seems to exist outside of reality. He is intangible. He is Magritte’s mystery. He is fulfillment in the unrepresentable for he can never be caught in his intangible form. He takes action seemingly without substantial body, almost like a ghost. Yet he is known to be real. He is not on the city streets, but he lurks below, hovers above, punctures through our reality. He is not seen, his presence is divined. He is a signifier without a signified.

Freud and Lacan Bring it Together

The unrepresentable, that which lays outside our conscious knowledge of reality, that which cannot be named or coded with language or sign because nothing in reality corresponds to it, Barthes signifies as the obtuse in film and the punctum in photography, and Magritte calls the mystery. But as Slavoj Zizek points out, Jaques Lacan has also given it a name which brings into focus the origin of this other reality. Lacan applied Freudian psychology to film theory. The mystery that lay outside reality, the indefinable presence that cannot be tethered with language or semiotics, Lacan calls the Real. The

Real is what is left over from the symbolic, it is what we have not been able to compartmentalize and tuck away in our brains through solid name and definition. It is what we cannot replace with word or sign. It is like a phantom, like Fantomas, fully present but without substantial form.

Lacan takes the Real from Freudian psychology where the Real is the first phase of infant development. In this stage, the infant still sees himself as part of the mother; there is no separation and therefore, no void. There is complete fulfillment and wholeness. It is prior to language, for the need for language comes only when there is need, a need to communicate to get a desired entity one does not have. Language comes from lack, when people have a desire to grab onto something, or as Magritte put it, when “they want something secure to hang on to, so they can save themselves from the void”. (Gablik p. 11) The void, the lack comes from the infant’s separation from his mother when he starts to see himself as a separate being, as an individual. This separation brings about a sense of loss and void, and where there is void there is a need to fill it. The Real, which comprises the fullness experienced as an infant, is repressed the rest of our adult life in the Symbolic Phase of Freudian psychology. The Real is outside of and prior to language and symbolism. “The elementary feature of a symbolic order in its relation to ‘reality’ is that it always contains a surplus signifier, a signifier which is ‘empty’ in the sense that there is nothing in reality which corresponds to it.” (Zizek p. 236) The surplus signifier is a signifier without a signified. The surplus signifier is representative of the Real.

What represents the unrepresentable, the manifestation of the Real, Lacan conceives as “*Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz*: the signifier which acts as a representative – a

trace – of the excluded (‘repressed’) representation...excluded from diegetic reality”.

(Zizek, p. 238) It is a stain that is a signifying trace of the maternal Real which is repressed in our symbolic, patriarchal reality. “A stain of the Real [is] a detail which ‘sticks out’ from the frame of symbolic reality – in short, a traumatic surplus of the Real over the Symbolic...this detail has no substance in itself – it is, so to speak, ‘substantiated’, caused, created...” (Zizek, p. 235). In human psychology, what is repressed will find a way to break through the symbolic. In art, the repressed, the unrepresented, the pre-linguistic breaks out of the symbolic as the obtuse, the punctum, the mystery, *Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz*. And what is unrepresented, what the symbolic fails to show is signified by this stain. “*Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz* designates a signifier which fills out the void of the excluded representation, whereas a...stain is a representation which fills out a hole in the Symbolic, giving body to the ‘unspeakable’ – its mere presence testifies that we are in domain where ‘words fail’.” (Zizek p. 239) It is this unspeakable signifier which brings fulfillment in that it completes what the symbolic cannot grasp. And this indefinable thing in art and in life that we could not put a finger on before but whose presence we could sense, is the Real. The Real manifests through Lacan’s *Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz*, through Magritte’s mystery, through *Fantomas*, through Barthes’ punctum and obtuse. The indefinable, the indescribable, the pre-linguistic, the total fulfillment is the Real. It is what we know is there but cannot see or grasp in our symbolic, linguistic reality. It is what we have lost, and what we try to reclaim. Yet, when we face it, we feel the void we did not consciously know was there. We are disturbed by it because of its very nature – intangible, indefinable, unrepresented,

yet always knowable. And only by first realizing the void that exists, can one then be filled by the presence of the Real.

Conclusion

The history of communication has existed to box up and label reality and ship it off so it can hopefully be received on the other end. It has been to assign arbitrary representations to stand in for the real thing. But there is an existence outside of our conscious reality which has no name or stand-in. Yet somehow this existence is known, even if it is not understood. It is unrepresented for there is nothing in our reality that corresponds to it. And yet we still know it. Many theorists have named its signifier from the obtuse of a film, to the punctum of a photograph, the mystery of Magritte, and the sublime of philosophical thought. It has been shown here that the unsignified presence is the Real. That which has gone unrepresented in symbolic language is known in visual art. That is art's significance, to remind us of what exists outside of our symbolic reality, to unhinge us from the restraints of formalized language, to represent the unrepresentable.

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(I) Still from *Ivan The Terrible*



(II) Koen Wessing: *Nicaragua*, 1979



(III) Rene Magritte: *The Use of Words I*, 1928-29



(V) Magritte in 1938 beside
The Savage Le barbare c. 1928
inspired by the *Fantomas* book cover
Note Fantomas' intangible form.



(IV) *Fantomas*: book cover