The Short Story and the Photographic: Twentieth-Century Imagetexts In and Of the Americas

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The Graduate Center, City University of New York
THE SHORT STORY AND THE PHOTOGRAPHIC: TWENTIETH-CENTURY IMAGETEXTS IN AND OF THE AMERICAS

by

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ABSTRACT

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The visuality of the short story has been primarily studied by comparing the short story to painting and to lyrical poetry. This dissertation departs from that tradition by examining the visuality of the short story from an intermedial point of view, that is, with a focus on the relationship between the short story and the photographic visual. The works studied are called imagetexts, hybrid works wherein verbal texts and photographic images coexist variously in an equal relationship. I explore a variety of connections between the short story and the photographic when they are conjoined in the following ways: where the visual image and the verbal text are published together, where image and text are equal components in the telling of a story, where the short story is the source of a film adaptation and where short stories and photographs are deliberately paired to further inquire into the ways in which photography renews short fiction. This intermedial analysis of the short story and the photographic draws from photographic theory and from the writings of photographer and writer Julio Cortázar whose philosophy puts forward the idea of a reader who becomes the inventive co-creator of the fictional work. Hence, while this dissertation sheds new light on the visuality of the short story, it
simultaneously discovers the critical and creative potential of the conjoining of the short story and the photographic that is made visible in the active viewing and creative reading that results from an intermedial analysis of specific twentieth century short story imagetexts.
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On my desk is a photograph of my five year old granddaughter, Amaya, sitting at her desk, drawing and learning to write. Whenever I thought I might not continue, this photograph gave me the motivation to keep writing. I owe the joy that fills my heart and keeps me alive to my grandchildren, Amaya Elena and Simón Santiago Emilio.
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INTRODUCTION

In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction.”

Poe, “Review of Hawthorne’s Twice Told Tales” 1842.

…the photographer or the story writer finds himself obliged to choose and delimit an image or an event which must be meaningful, which is meaningful not only in itself, but rather is capable of acting on the viewer or reader as a kind of opening...


Given the ubiquity of the photograph and the short story in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the cultural influence of film--a technology based on the photograph--it is not surprising that Argentine writer and photographer Julio Cortázar depicted the short story as a photograph in his essay “Some Aspects of the Short Story.” But the meaningful connection between these two aesthetic forms was established much earlier by Edgar Allan Poe. It is commonplace among literary historians and critics to consider Edgar Allan Poe the founder of the modern short story and it is often said that Poe became canonized as the founder of the genre, posthumously, in the last decades of the nineteenth century. In an 1885 essay entitled “The Philosophy of the Short-story,” Brander Matthews coined the term ‘Short-story’ in order to distinguish this new genre from its antecedent, the tale. Matthews featured Poe’s work,
especially his “Review of Hawthorne’s *Twice Told Tales*” in order to emphasize the formal qualities of the short story. Thereafter, Poe’s writings became the founding documents of the genre in the Americas and, to the present day, the force of the visual effects of his stories inspires countless adaptations in film and other visual media.

Poe’s stories, like those of other short story writers, first appeared in magazines during the 1840s. Indeed, the context in which Poe wrote tales and criticism is one where magazines, literary, commercial or both, flourished. Critics who analyze short stories published in mid-nineteenth century American magazines, find that Poe’s choice to be a magazinist greatly influenced his ideas about the form. In the nineteenth century and, to a lesser degree in the twentieth century, short stories in American magazines were illustrated. Even when pictures were not intended to be story illustrations, the stories appeared surrounded by pictures. The phenomenal increase in images, especially photographic images, in the nineteenth century made it impossible, as Nancy Armstrong argues in her book, *Fiction in the Age of Photography*, for people to avoid confronting unprecedented quantities of images containing information about the world and its inhabitants. Illustration in magazines in the United States grew explosively as technologies for reproducing pictures in the latter half of the nineteenth century became more efficient, as images became cheaper to reproduce, and as magazines became more widely disseminated and commercialized. Given a modern context where vision is ubiquitous, it is not surprising that Poe, and many other writers and critics of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, conceptualized the short story in visual terms.

As of the early twentieth century, there is a notable decline in the publication of illustrated short stories, a fact attributed to the advent of cinema that was, for some historians, the most significant factor. During the late nineteenth century some writers already refused to
publish their fiction with illustrations which they envisioned as distractions in competition with their prose. Flaubert’s statement, “Jamais, moi vivant, on ne m’illustrera,” exemplifies the strength of objections raised about illustrated fiction by other writers such as Henry James. Targeting popular illustrated short stories in magazines, academics railed against the increasing commercialization of fiction, blaming its poor quality on this loss of autonomy and proceeded to provide alternative venues for the publication of serious and experimental stories. These academic journals and ‘little’ magazines, on whose pages advertisements did not interfere with the printed text, did not publish illustrated stories. Despite the fears that photographic images, especially present in mass culture, might compromise the literary, critic Karen Jacobs reminds us that a conflict at the heart of photography turns up in the work of modern writers. She defines this conflict as endemic to the photographic and present in ongoing tensions between “the optical truths of the documentary” and “the visual pleasures of art.” (Jacobs 25) This conflict finds expression in a variety of forms in the imagetexts discussed in these pages.

This project proposes to read selected modern short stories in contexts where they are accompanied by pictures in order to explore the visuality of the short story, one of its salient qualities examined in the past by critics who have related the short story to painting—primarily impressionism—and to the verbal imagery and concision of poetry. The short stories in this study will be read and viewed in situations where they were published and composed with photographs or conjoined with pictures derived from photographic technologies such as film and collage.¹ Extending from the late 1830s to the 1970s, this study explores more than one hundred

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¹ See Karen Jacobs’ study of literary texts and the visual, The Eye’s Mind: Literary Modernism and Visual Culture for the centrality of photography to an analysis of modernist literature. She states, “Although photography was invented in 1839, and therefore predates the modern period, I privilege it here over other visual technologies more strictly contemporary because its dissemination—as a technology, and ultimately, as an epistemology and ontology—is critical to our understanding of virtually every other twentieth-century form of visual culture.” (8)
years of literary and visual production from the era of Poe to that of Cortazar and Donald Barthelme. Each chapter features distinct parings between a particular story or stories and an image or series of images. And each pairing is at some level unlikely, surprising, or fraught with interpretive possibilities. It is precisely the uneasy relationship or tension between image and text, writer and photographer that is most revealing as it shows the immediate and latent trove of associations and dissociations to be made by the reader/viewer. Read together, these four chapters expand, in new ways, our appreciation of the visual qualities of the short story, they demonstrate the richness of meaning that emerges when photographic images are interwoven with short fiction, and they call attention to the potential for the emergence of critical and creative reader/viewers when confronted with literary and photographic imagetexts.

Critics who search for a definition of the distinctiveness of the short story discuss its formal construction by signaling the importance of closure, of its endings. Additionally, short story writers and theorists use terminology from art history and visual technology to reflect on the short story in their essays. Terms such as the frame, the tableau or scene, the detail, the microscope or the act of telescoping and cropping frequently serve to emphasize the pictorial or optical qualities of the story. Renowned short story theorist Charles E. May points out the image-making attributes of the genre by stressing its affinities with lyric poetry and impressionism. In her 1983 book, The Short Story, literary critic Valerie Shaw sees parallels in the development of the short story and styles of painting, in particular she points to what the short story and impressionist art have in common, a self-awareness of form in the acts of creation and reception. The complete yet unfinished effect of impressionist art and the short story require, for Shaw, the participation of the reader and viewer in the capture of something fleeting and in its
interpretation. The idea of the fleeting moment leads Shaw and other short story theorists to foreground photography and film as sources of influence for the genre in the twentieth century.

Drawing on these innovative scholarly approaches, in this dissertation, I analyze the visuality of the short story using an approach that moves beyond the assumption that a visual image that illustrates a literary text is necessarily subservient to it. Given the history of the modern short story—its emergence and development alongside the birth and rapid diffusion of photographic technologies—an iconological approach is the most productive way to engage the formative influence of visual technologies on the formal aspects of the short story. Literary theorist W. J. T. Mitchell defines the iconology of a text as a way to rethink the literary text in a visual culture context. Alongside the work of literary critic Mary Ann Caws on the relationships between literary texts and visual images, I draw on Mitchell’s core concept, the ‘imagetext,’ which is based on the view that all media are mixed media and on the envisioning of images and texts as interwoven entities. The idea of the ‘imagetext’ stands for the suturing of text (the verbal) and image (the visual) in an unstable dialectical relationship, unstable in that the relationship is not fixed, that it points to the porosity of pictorial and discursive frames undermining preconceptions about the separation of the verbal and the visual. Images and texts are analyzed as equal components of the works discussed and, as such, their complementarity involves their capacity to resist each other and to dialogue with each other, a dynamic whose openness is certain to provoke multilayered and varied reader/viewer responses.

This exploration of the interplay of photographic images and short story texts is also indebted to the work of literary critic Liliane Louvel, whose concept, the “iconotext,” has important affinities with Mitchell’s imagetext. The idea of the “iconotext” envisions images and texts in a literary work in an inescapable and equal relationship: they co-exist as combined and
yet irreducible elements. Louvel’s analysis of the “iconotext” in her book, *The Poetics of the Iconotext*, and in an essay devoted specifically to the role of the photographic image, “Photography as Critical idiom and Intermedial Criticism,” calls for an intermedial approach, namely the practice of paying attention to what might emerge in the oscillations across media in a particular work. Her term for what is engendered by the reader/viewer’s seizure of this in-between media is the “pictorial third.” This constitutes the basis of intermedial criticism, the lens through which the work is reread. In the examination of this project’s imagetexts, extra-textual insights and associations discovered from the combinations of images and texts discussed are brought to bear on these works as critical rereadings.

What the short stories, photographs and film adaptations analyzed in this project have in common besides their relationship to the pictorial is that they are outstanding experimental and innovative fictional statements whose dilemmas continue to inspire creative responses. This study does not discuss short stories from other contexts, in particular European short story writers who are widely known to have made a strong impact on the form, among the most notable are Nikolai Gogol, Guy de Maupassant and Anton Chekhov, nor does it look at comparable imagetexts outside of the Americas. This project considers the twentieth-century context of the works examined only in broad strokes: knowledge and insights are drawn from photographic theory when relevant to the photographic dimension of the images considered and when appropriate for the photographic context of their making. The first three chapters of the dissertation present and discuss stories accompanied by photographic images: they are both published with photographic pictures and transcoded into the cinematic wherein the photographic gives them a visual embodiment. The last chapter differs from these first three chapters by the fact that the short stories involved were not published with photographs: I
selected stories and juxtaposed them with photographs from the published photographic work of short story writers who were also photographers. The idea was to build on the insights attained in the analysis of short story and photographic imagetexts from previous chapters in order to argue, in this last chapter, for an enriched understanding of both the short stories and the photographs as a result of my juxtapositions. Furthermore, insights gained from the experiment in Chapter Four as well as the knowledge obtained from the first three chapters point to a heightened appreciation of the quintessentially visual qualities of the short story.

I begin this exploration of the juxtaposition of short stories and photographs in Chapter One with an examination of Henry James’s Volume 15 of his New York Edition and pictorialist photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn’s photogravure frontispiece for the same volume. The effects of the combination of these stories and the photogravure by two artists who enjoyed a similar aesthetic sense are probed in this discussion. After an overview of the extensive critical work on this collaboration, the chapter focuses on a dynamic of echoing effects discovered in the oscillations between the frontispiece and the stories and on a dialogue about portraiture that emerges from the image and the stories. Key questions about illustration and the relationship of the photographic image and the literary text arise from this collaboration and inform, albeit in a much changed context, the questions posed in the next three chapters about the photographic and the literary. Chapter Two considers short stories constructed with photographic images beginning in mid-twentieth century, an increasingly visual and photographic era. The imagetext short stories that are the subjects of this chapter exist as critical responses to this era. I argue that photographer Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes’s story The Sweet Flypaper of Life and the imagetext short stories by Donald Barthelme share at least three features discovered using an intermedial analysis: ambiguity is accentuated by the dialogue between images and text; the
photographer and the writers exploit the tensions that arise from the interweaving of the truth value and the fictional qualities of the photographic in constructing their stories; and, they frame their stories using the dialogic nature of jazz and the blues translated as a dynamic conversation between image and text. I suggest that these stories challenge traditional narrative forms and that powerful political effects issue from such creative imagetext storytelling. In Chapter Three it is posited that film adaptations of short stories lead to an inquiry into how the short story as a source text is transformed into a new and different medium, the cinematic: specifically, it points to how the cinematic, in its own way, incorporates the visual impact of the story and then to how the effects of the film adaptation, in turn, highlight the story’s visuality. Additionally, the film spectator becomes, in this analysis, a viewer who reads and can manipulate films seen on DVD thereby establishing provocative connections between readers, viewers, stories, and films. In the final chapter, Chapter Four, I contend that the juxtaposition of photographs and short stories by writers who were also photographers offers the opportunity to expand the exploration of features shared by the short story and the photograph: among them, a stress on ambiguities due to the demands of compression, tension and intensity that accompany either a tight framing or the internal organization of elements, and openings due to the explosive potential of the short story’s impact on the reader. This chapter takes up Cortázar’s thinking about the short story and the photograph and about the features he believes to be essential to the construction of an exceptional short story. His concept of the critical reader, developed in his novel *Hopscotch* and defined as one who in reading becomes a co-creator of the work, is considered in order to contemplate the continued relevance of his thinking on this matter and its pertinence to the reading/viewing of an imagetext consisting of a short story and a photographic image.
CHAPTER ONE
A PHOTOGRAPHIC FRONTISPICE AND FIVE SHORT STORIES
Alvin Langdon Coburn and Henry James

INTRODUCTION

There has been a significant amount of scholarship about Henry James’s controversial use of photographs as volume frontispieces for the twenty-four volumes of his New York Edition of *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, a deluxe edition of his collected works, selected by him and published between 1907 and 1909. The twenty-four frontispieces are photogravures made from photographs taken by the well-known pictorialist photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn, who worked in close collaboration with James. On the one hand, most critics writing about the collaboration between James and Coburn have wrestled with the question of James’s controversial—often described as odd—decision to use photography to illustrate a deluxe edition such as the New York Edition, given his ambivalent position on literary illustration. On the other hand, some literary critics and photographic historians have pointed out similarities in James’s and Coburn’s aesthetics, suggesting that the photographic frontispieces complement James’s prose and that the collaboration is a testament to James’s receptivity to the artistic possibilities of the photographic.

The collaboration began in 1906 when James asked Coburn to take his picture for what was the traditional frontispiece, a first volume portrait for complete editions in this period and,
pleased with the result, hired Coburn to take photographs for the other twenty-three volumes of
the New York Edition.2 James’s correspondence with Scribner’s indicates that he originally
planned to use hand-drawn illustrations for the Edition but, at the same time, expressed concern
that such illustrations would distract from his writings.3 The encounter with Coburn was
fortuitous as it gave James the opportunity to see Coburn’s work. Impressed with the young
photographer’s images, James asked Scribner’s to hire him to provide a frontispiece photograph
for each volume. Using photographs as frontispieces would keep the images distant from his
texts and underline their decorative value. Indeed, James did not consider photography an artistic
medium and did not worry that they would distract attention from his writing. This, along with
his fondness for the young Coburn and the style of his work, made the photographic illustration
of the New York Edition agreeable to James.

Not surprisingly, and despite James’s admiration for Coburn’s photographs, Coburn was
not credited for his images in the Edition except in the last preface, the preface to “The Golden
Bowl.” Hence, this preface is the only place in the Edition where Coburn is recognized and
where James, in a brief discussion of the collaboration, presents his views on illustration (Art of
the Novel 331-335). In general terms, James tells us that the illustration of fiction is not
acceptable because it competes with the prose text and is especially negative when the text is
highly illustrative itself. His well-known metaphor for the problematic coexistence of pictures
and texts is that of the “grafting” of another picture on his “own picture” (332). At the same time,

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2 According to critic Carol Shloss, Coburn first met James in 1905. Coburn, an accomplished portraitist, had
requested a sitting from James for a project photographing literary celebrities for Century Magazine (59).
3 In a 12 June 1906 letter to Charles Scribner’s Sons, James discusses illustration. While he is being photographed
by Coburn and considering photographic illustration for the Edition, he is also open to drawings by a “charming
artist” and suggests one, Albert Sterner. James is adamant that he does not want magazine-type black-and-white
drawings. (Edel, Letters 407-408).
James’s comments in the preface suggest that the illustration of a text is acceptable under conditions such as those that were set by the writer and the photographer in this project. The first such condition was the selection of a medium such as photography that was, for James, totally different and non-competitive. The idea was then to capture scenes in photographs that relate to something in the prose text and simultaneously exist as independent objects. In order to do this, the images had to include no human subjects (“actors”) that “plead their case with shyness” by being echoes of nothing in particular in the text, and moreover, they were expected to “discretely disavow emulating” the text (333).

Addressing the search for the frontispieces for the two *Golden Bowl* volumes (Vols. 23 and 24), James recounts how, with Coburn, they were able to recognize when *Portland Place* (the frontispiece photograph for Vol. 24), at a certain time, could be seen to generalize itself, thereby giving an example of how an image can be connected to an idea or to the spirit of the text without referring to anything in particular from it. James states: “The thing was to induce the vision of Portland Place to generalize itself. … at a given moment the great featureless Philistine vista would itself perform a miracle, would become interesting, for a splendid atmospheric hour, as London knows how …” (335). What is noteworthy in James’s description here is his knowledge of the photographic: his own understanding of the transformative possibilities of light in his writing is transplanted to looking at an actual place and waiting for when light conditions give it a quality that transcends its commonplace material being and turns it into an imaginative scene. Notwithstanding James’s reservations about illustration and the fact that he barely credited Coburn, his correspondence and Coburn’s autobiography attest to the fact that this collaboration was pleasurable and productive for both artists.
In this chapter, I am less interested in the question of whether or not James’s decision to use photographs to illustrate the New York Edition was strange and more intrigued by the effects of the artists’ shared aesthetics and by what the project’s innovative practices bring to the relationship between the short story and photography. A close analysis of one particular frontispiece and five tales from volume 15 of the New York Edition illuminates how the juxtaposition of a photograph and several short stories works to enrich the viewer’s and the reader’s experience. This chapter begins by drawing from the work of the many literary critics and photographic historians who have written on the James–Coburn collaboration. Those critics who have commented on the meanings of the photographic illustration of the New York Edition in general are presented first, followed by others who have included in their analyses of the Edition specific examples of image and text.

After some introductory remarks, the second part of this chapter puts forward an analysis of volume 15 that focuses on how Coburn’s photogravure *Saltram’s Seat* works with James’s five short stories on the literary life to produce exchanges between image and texts as back-and-forth echoes that direct the viewer-reader’s attention to aspects of the works that result in a heightened appreciation of both. Following this, a vibrant dialogue about portraiture and celebrity is seen to materialize in the juxtaposition of the photograph and the tales. Finally, the magical aftereffects triggered by echoes between image and texts as well as the insights gained from envisioning the frontispiece and the tales as reverberating portraits demonstrate how the innovative photographic illustration of short stories in volume 15 engenders a dynamic between image and text that gives rise to an intermedial experience, the effects of which are seen to enrich the viewer’s and the reader’s appreciation of the photograph and the short story. Moreover, this
experience intensifies the visibility of the formal qualities of image and text, thereby sharpening the viewer’s and reader’s critical capacities.

CRITICS ON THE COLLABORATION

Two critics find in James’s collaboration on travel books with the illustrator Joseph Pennell a foreshadowing of James’s work with Coburn, thereby demonstrating that Pennell and Coburn shared a common aesthetic and that James was a dominant influence on their collaborative work with him. Critic Amy Tucker finds examples of how Pennell’s landscape illustrations for James’s stories and travel books both capture the spirit of the text and remain independent, making this earlier experience with hand-drawn illustrations a template for the James–Coburn collaboration. Another critic, Wendy Graham, looks comparatively at the work of illustrators Pennell and Coburn, highlighting the unexpected aesthetic commonalities between the two despite Pennell’s disparagement of photography. She explains that both defended their works in terms of craft and makes clear that they thought of pictorialism in terms of Impressionism.

In her study of James’s *The American Scene*, a work that was completed shortly after James’s 1904-05 visit to America and published before James embarked on the New York Edition, Graham argues that the writer’s exposure to new technologies in America is visible in the cinematic qualities of his prose. Although Graham notes that Coburn’s photographs for the New York Edition are not his best work, she seems to suggest that the conditions underlying James’s decision to illustrate the Edition with photographic frontispieces as well as his ability to
see photographically is due, in part, to his understanding of new media resulting from his involvement with urban realities when he did research for *The American Scene*. Tucker’s analysis signals a relationship between the New York Edition frontispiece photogravures and illustrated travel books in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries whereas Graham’s analysis provocatively states James’s fine sense of the photographic and the cinematic. In spite of James’s photographic acuity, underlined by Graham and by Coburn himself in his autobiography, the ambiguities stemming from James’s decision, given his views on illustration and photography, to illustrate the New York Edition photographically continue to raise questions that are the concerns of literary and photographic theorists.

Of the first group of critics, who have closely examined the James–Coburn collaboration without providing analyses of how particular images and texts work together and who stress both commonalities and differences in the work of the writer and the photographer, literary critic Carol Shloss’s analysis is the most complete.4 Noting aesthetic affinities and photographic sensibilities, Shloss states that the indisputable similarities in their aesthetic and political views remained unacknowledged at the time. She says, “Perhaps it was this fundamental though unacknowledged agreement in aesthetic aims that explains the enjoyment both James and Coburn derived from their collaboration.” (67) She highlights some of their shared artistic concerns: the importance of keen observation, attention to angles of observation and points of view, care in framing, composition and selection of detail. Shloss discusses the collaboration in the context of her larger work on writers and photographers in America between 1840 and 1940.

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4 In his 1955 essay on the collaboration, critic Joseph J. Firebaugh is among the first to affirm similarities between the frontispieces and James’s prose. He suggests that Coburn’s images embody James’s spirit because of how they capture the fleeting instant and use time and light in the manner of the Impressionists.
Her concern is to show what the camera revealed for American writers who grappled with questions about the camera and literature, namely how photographers and writers used “raw material” and transformed it into art at a time when the camera was a central fact of American life. Her chapter on the collaboration, entitled “Henry James and Alvin Langdon Coburn, The Frame of Prevision,” from her 1987 book *In Visible Light: Photography and the American Writer, 1840-1940*, draws from James’s preface to *The Golden Bowl* and from his correspondence with Coburn during their collaboration. She observes that, on the surface, their differences depended on whether or not photography was art for them: for James it was not whereas for Coburn it was to such a degree that he contributed fervently to promoting its fine art status.

According to Shloss, James considered photography a passive and transcriptive act in contrast to writing, which was an active and creative endeavor. James’s position on the limitations of photography was unwavering, as stated in a 1912 letter to Coburn: “Photography insists for me in remaining at best but photography” (qtd. in Shloss 61). Shloss, however, finds parallels in their aesthetics: James’s critique of naturalist fiction is said to coincide with Coburn’s adoption of pictorialism’s challenge to positivism. She says, “Coburn would have agreed with James that photographers had ‘only to recognize,’ but instead of opposing recognition to creation, he would have identified recognition or informed vision as an active talent …”; about their differences, she adds, “… it was a curious disagreement for them to have, for with regard to his own work, James struggled openly to justify the same things Coburn did: he spoke to the novelist’s life of vision as an active and viable mode of being and he also knew full well the determining role of the angle of observation” (63-64).
On a deeper level, Shloss builds a case for Coburn’s artistic philosophy to demonstrate its compatibility with James’s ideas on art. Ironically, for her, James used the language of photography to describe the dynamics of his narrative at various times yet would not acknowledge the potentiality of photography to be more than a mere recording of reality. She believes that James had affinities for the photographic that remained unspoken at the time and have not been sufficiently acknowledged. For Shloss, both artists espoused an elitism of vision that prompted a critique of realism and mass culture. Although she does not discuss the relationship of specific frontispiece images to text in the New York Edition, her description of James’s and Coburn’s art as that of sharp observers with great talent for isolating and representing a scene using different artistic frames suggests, for her, that there is aesthetic harmony between text and image in the New York Edition despite unrecognized similarities and the manifest inequality in the partnership. Many critics, however, remain perplexed by James’s decision to illustrate the New York Edition with photographs and seek to further understand it in the context of more recent reconsiderations of the Edition.

These critics propose readings of the New York Edition that present it as a text that problematizes modern literary authority, pointing to how a text envisioned as an expression of a complete oeuvre in monumental terms can simultaneously undermine the authority of its single monolithic author. Critics Stuart Culver and J. Hillis Miller offer different perspectives on James’s New York Edition based on a reevaluation of the prefaces, revisions, and other features of the Edition such as the frontispieces; their rereading is one that pays attention to “the Edition itself as a text” as expressed by another critic, David McWhirter, in his introduction to his edited book of fairly recent criticism, *Henry James’s New York Edition: The Construction of*
Here, the Edition is reread as an intertextual work involving many voices: those in the revisions, the prefaces, the frontispieces, and the excluded works. A different James emerges from the Edition when understood as a dialogical text: side by side with the image of James the ‘Master’ appears a more human and conflicted, or anxious, James. For example, John Carlos Rowe, who writes the foreword to the book edited by McWhirter, juxtaposes John Singer Sargent’s 1912 painting of James, where he appears masterly, to Coburn’s 1906 photographic portraits of James, where, despite the strong depiction of intellect, Rowe detects self-doubt: this comparison visually illustrates the two aspects of James, revealed by attending to unresolvable tensions in the Edition (Rowe xxv). In light of how the Edition challenges traditional notions of artistic authority, these critics see new interpretive possibilities in the unorthodox qualities of the photographs that serve as frontispieces and in the way the frontispieces of the New York Edition differ from traditional practices of literary illustration.

Arguing that James wished for a deluxe edition that would bring him commercial success, Culver suggests that he ended up producing a work that challenged the traditional deluxe edition format, a strategy that, paradoxically, jeopardized his chance at the success he desperately sought. In his chapter “Ozymandias and the Mastery of Ruins: The Design of the New York Edition,” Culver says, “… I want to describe the New York Edition as a specific deviation from the standard format of the deluxe edition and to propose that it is designed to challenge the conceptions of text and author underlying such collections even as it tries to capitalize on the public’s appetite for them” (40). Furthermore, Culver notes that James’s placement of his tales in between his longer works is unusual; he calls it a spatial move in an
otherwise temporal sequence and believes that it constitutes an “interruption” that becomes a “counterstory,” a move that calls attention to the innovations as well as to the “repetitions and revisions that punctuate his career” (53). For Culver, the usual story of the deluxe edition is a chronological demonstration of the development of the author’s artistic ability. Regarding the placement of James’s shorter work, which he calls “experiments in form and technique,” he states that “the supplement at the center of the Edition inserts spatial logics in the midst of the chronology that links the novels and so complicates the expected growth into mastery” (52).

Even though he does not address the collaboration directly in his 1995 chapter, Culver’s insights about the placement of James’s tales in the Edition, his presentation of the tensions between success and failure or aesthetic and economic values, and his assertions that the New York Edition contests traditional notions about complete editions are applicable to a discussion of the frontispieces and the literary texts. Culver scrutinizes the collaboration in an earlier essay, “How Photographs Mean,” where his analysis suggests that the relation of the visual and the literary in the twentieth century must be rethought in light of the photographic. In this essay, he examines the collaboration as one example of many interactions between American photography and literature in this same period. Culver asserts that the photographic image serves to highlight the differences between the visual and the verbal more pointedly and to simultaneously complicate the distinction between the two media (190). In this earlier essay, Culver decries the work of critics Shloss and Ralph Bogardus on the James–Coburn collaboration because of how they eliminate distinctions between the photographs and the texts in ways that obviate what can be discovered by attending to their differences: the anxiety and loss of authority the reader finds in James’s prefaces is also visible, for him, in the frontispiece illustrations. The strangeness of
the decision to use photographs echoes, for Culver, the anxieties he finds present in the Edition as a whole. He maintains that James chose photography at a time when his ideas about agency and textual authority were being tested and that this choice is one of a number of factors that illustrates James’s ambiguities about producing the Edition.

In contrast to Culver’s argument, J. Hillis Miller proposes a question about James’s views on illustration that illuminates James’s ambivalent thoughts on the subject without giving an answer. In reiterating James’s confidence about the radical difference of photography and literature, Hillis Miller suggests that, for James, the evocative power of the literary text might not be threatened by illustrations when both text and image “point differently to” a third thing, the idea or type, which is beyond image and text (141). At the same time, Hillis Miller notes James’s fear of illustration, specifically its potential to threaten the evocative power of the text by distracting the reader. Hillis Miller calls James’s “double theory of photographic illustration”—developed in James’s preface to *The Golden Bowl*—the belief that photographic illustrations can echo the text at a distance and at the same time make present something in the picture that is not in the text. The central question posed by Hillis Miller’s reflections on James’s ideas about illustration is whether or not the type or idea pre-exists its representation in picture or word (141). It seems that this question involving the contiguity of visual and verbal art must remain a question and that, as such, the ambiguities expressed by James about the relationship of picture and text must remain unexplained until the larger question is answered. In what follows, I argue that close analytical attention to the actual images and texts in the New York Edition can further elucidate the many issues raised by critics who discuss it in general terms.
IMAGE AND TEXT ANALYSES

Alluding to specific connections between James’s fiction and Coburn’s photographs and commenting on the felicitous outcome of their conjoining, critic Charles Higgins asserts that the photographic frontispiece images complement and frame James’s fiction: “… each Coburn frontispiece becomes the opening symbol and closing echo of its text …” (669). He states that the images of rivers, bridges, domes, and doorways point productively to moments in the developing awareness of the characters in James’s fiction. He cites examples from all of the volumes of the New York Edition to illustrate the multifaceted complementarity of image and text and concludes that this juxtaposition settles James’s earlier problems with the illustration of his work because of its capacity to provide successful interpenetrations of the real and the fictional. For example, he presents the frontispiece image of the shop in volume 23—the first part of The Golden Bowl, entitled “The Curiosity Shop”—as an outstanding example of the successful fusion of James’s idea of a shop and its factual representative. Overall, Higgins shows and argues in his analysis that the collaboration produced a relationship between text and image faithful to James’s thoughts on illustration as they appear in the preface to The Golden Bowl.

Critic Ralph Bogardus also argues that the photographic frontispieces and texts of this collaboration demonstrate James and Coburn’s shared aesthetic values, but he does not see their interaction as a merger of the real and the fictional. He believes that James came to appreciate photographic illustration when he became familiar with Coburn’s work. In his book on the collaboration, Pictures and Texts: Henry James, A.L. Coburn, and New Ways of Seeing in Literary Culture, he says, “… after reflecting on the qualities he saw in Coburn’s work, recognizing an artistry in this work that was entirely compatible with his own, and discovering
that photography’s objectivity and inclusiveness were perfectly suited to his needs, James embraced Coburn’s art, embarked on the collaborative enterprise, and proceeded to become, as it were, his own illustrator” (Bogardus 149). Although Bogardus is credited by most critics with producing the most comprehensive account of the James–Coburn collaboration, his analysis of the frontispieces and of James’s texts has been criticized because it leads him to a literal interpretation of the frontispiece image as a reflection and condensation of James’s text, which is for some critics precisely the kind of reading James was most leery of. Bogardus describes four functions of the photographic frontispieces based on James’s comments in the preface to *The Golden Bowl* and develops the fourth function, which is, for him, the most important: they serve as interpretations of the text in its entirety or its visual condensation (Culver, “How Photographs Mean” 201).5 The photographic image, understood by Bogardus as a symbol that condenses the verbal text, affirms the artistic nature of the photograph and encourages an allegorical reading of the image. He notes that Coburn’s images refer symbolically to James’s text either by something in the content of the image or by its form. In the frontispiece photogravure for volume 18 entitled *By St Peter’s*, Bogardus finds that the fountain depicted in the foreground of this image—its content—exists as a visual substitute for Daisy’s exuberance in contrast to the stone structures of the street and St Peter’s Basilica, both meant to represent European social constraints. Together, these elements are seen to condense and capture the tragic dilemma of the short story, “Daisy Miller.”

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5 Bogardus’s four functions are identified and summarized by Culver ("How Photographs Mean" 201). Bogardus’s other three functions are as follows: the photographic frontispieces as sets or backdrops; as depictions of what or how a character sees the world; and as echoes of a type or an idea.
Another of Bogardus’s many examples of how the form and content of the image convey the meaning of the text is his view of the frontispiece image *The Doctor’s Door* in the first New York Edition volume of James’s *The Wings of the Dove*. Here, Bogardus states that the frontal image of the door announces to the viewer that the subject of the text, the central character Milly’s knowledge of her impending death, will have to be faced by her directly. He contrasts this door to other doors in the frontispiece images that are depicted at an oblique angle, suggesting that the situations these oblique images allude to in the texts are, in contrast, predicaments that will take time to be acknowledged and faced. Avoiding literal connections between frontispiece images and texts, other critics concerned with image and text in the New York Edition bring social and cultural dimensions to their critical commentaries.

The novelty of James’s decision to use photography to illustrate the Edition was intended to give James, according to critic Ira B. Nadel, a larger audience and to give both James and Scribner’s, his publisher, a commercial success. In his chapter from the book, *Henry James’s The New York Edition: The Construction of Authorship* entitled “Visual Culture: The Photographic Frontispieces to the New York Edition,” Nadel reminds us that a deluxe edition would inevitably have been illustrated and would most likely contain reproductions of hand-drawn illustrations. He believes that the juxtaposition of image and text in the Edition provides a “balancing” of the fictional and the real because the images ground the texts in the concrete and thereby perhaps entice the reader to become more open and amenable to the difficulties of James’s late prose style (Nadel 93). For Nadel, the use of photographic technology to produce the frontispieces works to validate James’s fiction for a contemporary public in the early twentieth century because it is a modern and, by then, ubiquitous technology. The adjacency of James’s texts to the
photographs as material objects supports Nadel’s argument that the frontispieces are cultural as well as aesthetic artifacts. It is precisely, for him, this cultural value that allows the photogravures to ground the fiction in the real and to sustain James’s hopes of regaining his American audience and his place in American literary culture.

Nadel illustrates his argument about cultural value in a discussion of several volumes of the New York Edition, two of which contain James’s tales. His first example is from volume 10, which contains the novella *The Spoils of Poynton* and two short stories illustrated by a frontispiece image entitled *Some of the Spoils*. Nadel elaborates on the connection of the frontispiece image in this volume to one text, the novella, where it is clear that the depiction of physical objects in the image invokes the central role of objects in the novella. He also examines image and tales in volume 11 and suggests, in contrast, that here the image speaks for something in all of the stories. The eleventh volume contains the novella *What Maisie Knew* and the stories “In the Cage” and “The Pupil.” Nadel finds that the frontispiece image of a grocer’s shop, reminiscent of the kind of shop in the story entitled “In the Cage,” expresses a situation of social entrapment that is central in all three fictional works, thereby establishing the possibility of a connection between the frontispiece image and all three tales. As in his analysis of other volumes, the frontispiece image of the grocer’s shop serves as a physical grounding and cultural reference point for the fiction. In sum, for Nadel, the power of the photographic frontispiece lies in its ability to echo something in the fiction, as suggested by James in the preface to *The Golden Bowl*, and, though James’s captions are often misleading, the grounding function of the frontispieces is not weakened by them. Furthermore, this grounding of the fiction in the real is due to the cultural and material features of the photographic frontispieces put forth by Nadel.
The materiality of photography is also a central concern for critic Timothy Dow Adams, who sees it as a way to make sense of James’s decision to illustrate the New York Edition with photographs. Adams asserts that James overcame his aversion to the illustration of his fiction when he realized that the search for photographic images involved finding material from his past. More specifically, he notes, James used the photographic frontispieces as a means of replenishing his material in much the same way that, in the prefaces, he repeatedly discussed the material for his fiction. Adams surmises that James’s acceptance of photographic illustration was equally due to his control over the project, which allowed him to orchestrate the selection of images, to limit them to the frontispieces, and to separate them from the text with a tissue paper containing a caption he wrote.

Adams’s arguments that tie the materiality of the frontispiece photographs to James’s concern with the material for his fiction in the prefaces at first seems contrary to James’s own views about what the photographic frontispieces should be. In the preface to *The Golden Bowl*, James states that the frontispieces are echoes of something in the text, that the objects depicted stem from mental images, and that the depiction of the scene should be generalized, indicating primarily that light conditions and camera positioning can transfigure the captured real. Adams reminds us, however, that photographs are always also images of something specific. It is, for Adams, Coburn’s pictorialism that resolves the contradiction between James’s statement in the aforementioned preface and the indexicality of the photograph. For this critic, Coburn’s images convey mood by softening the photographic sharpness that signals specificity. James’s concern with his material and his declaration that Coburn’s images should be an expression of types and not anything specific is found, for Adams, in Coburn’s ability to provide both an evocation of
James’s subject matter in the materiality of the photograph and a generalization of James’s fictional subjects in the various techniques he used to convey the atmosphere of a scene that diminished the documentary nature of his photographs.

The photographic aspects of the collaboration are given acute attention in art and photographic historian Carol Armstrong’s 1998 book, *Scenes in a Library: Reading the Photograph in the Book, 1843-1875*. It situates the collaboration at the end of a history of nineteenth-century photographically illustrated books, starting with the first work of its kind, Henry Fox Talbot’s 1843 *The Pencil of Nature*, and ending with a commentary on the James–Coburn collaboration in her afterword. She highlights the method used for the reproduction and publication of photographs in books in the late nineteenth century, the halftone process, a technology that by the 1920s and 1930s had, according to Armstrong, radically changed the relationship of photographic images to letterpress in illustrated periodicals and books. It is in the context of the development and universal application of this technology that she comments on the James–Coburn collaboration, suggesting that it is more fully and productively understood as a dialectical response to the mass mediation of photography that was brought about by the halftone process. Her analysis of the collaboration focuses on James’s text, the preface to *The Golden Bowl*, and Coburn’s frontispiece image for the first volume of the *The Golden Bowl*, “The Curiosity Shop,” which she takes as the model for image and text relationships in the New York Edition volumes.

She explains that, for both Coburn and James, the frontispiece project was conceived in opposition to the more common positivist illustration practices. Despite the fact that the photographic frontispieces exist in concrete relation to the physical world because of their
indexicality, for both Coburn and James the frontispiece project was intended to produce images originating not in concrete objects but in the mental objects of James’s fiction. Some of the elements that show the anti-positivist nature of the collaboration noted by Armstrong are the fact that the texts existed before the image, that the images are optical symbols meant to generalize the stories, and that their captions do not name the actual geographical locations of the images (430). She states that James’s prose represents an indirect and oblique view of action and, in this way, is similar to Coburn’s image of the shop, which is shot from an indirect and oblique angle. She concludes by suggesting that James inserts the frontispiece images and the readings of his work in the prefaces in the New York Edition in order to powerfully contest the dominant presence of the literary bestseller and the mass photograph. James’s stance against bestseller fiction is indisputable and is a core question in his tales of the literary life; in a similar spirit, Coburn makes his photographic images as distinct as possible from documentary photographs in order to achieve the photographic artistry that is his aim.

Armstrong reveals a key feature of the halftone process that is of interest for the imagetexts of the New York Edition: the process allows the production, for illustrated books and periodicals, of a seamless transition between photographic image and text (424-426). Going against the grain, the James–Coburn collaboration evinces its resistance to mass processes in marking the visibility of the seam between the photographic frontispiece and the texts of the Edition. Although the reproduction of the photogravures is more industrial than James or Coburn would have wished, the frontispiece image exists on its own page without verbal text and is surrounded by the slightly visible mark of the frame of the photogravure plate, the frame of the image itself, and the ample blank margins of the page. Unlike periodicals and illustrated
bestsellers, the isolation of the frontispiece image in the New York Edition volumes heightens the viewer’s and reader’s awareness of the two different media and of their deliberate suturing. If this visible suture is understood as interrupting the expectations of early twentieth-century readers and viewers about the joining of image and text, Armstrong’s point of view coincides with critics such as Charles Harmon who also see a challenge to ordinary perception in Coburn’s photographs and their relationship to James’s fiction.

Harmon argues that a result of the New York Edition’s imagetext is the sharpening of the viewer’s and reader’s awareness. For him, the frontispieces echo the moral issues present in James’s tales. In his chapter on the collaboration, “Alvin Langdon Coburn’s Frontispieces to Henry James’s New York Edition,” published in *The Victorian Illustrated Book* (2002), he agrees with the many positions put forth by contemporary critics about James’s decision to use photographs to illustrate the Edition, such as his need to make money, to regain an audience, or to comply with the conventions that were mandatory for deluxe editions. Stating, like most critics, that Coburn’s photographs are visual analogues to James’s texts, Harmon proposes, however, that what has not been discussed in the relation of image to text in the Edition is how the frontispiece images end up embodying the values found in James’s texts. He attributes James’s ambiguous prose to his “fascination” with alterity and finds this quality of otherness present in the blurry nature and in the framing of Coburn’s images. Describing Coburn’s frontispieces, Harmon says,

6 About the interplay of image and text and the conveying of values from one medium to the other, Harmon writes, “James ... retooled the conventions of illustration so that he could smoothly transfer the exclusive and ambiguous dynamics of his literary texts to the popular and much less ambiguous medium of photography” (303).
Each of Coburn’s photos is deliberately blurry, framed in a subtly self-conscious and arresting manner, so that the apparent legibility of the subject matter is always being undermined by a restless quality of tentativeness, uncertainty, and abstract potentiality—the sense that the world is not the solid, predictable place most people think it is, and that almost anything can conceivably happen. (303)

These features of Coburn’s images have the potential to disrupt the viewer’s ordinary expectations of what a photographic image should be, and, for Harmon, this disruption has the potential to trigger a critical reflection on perceptual habits. To argue his point, Harmon analyses Coburn’s image of an English country home, the frontispiece to the first New York Edition volume of the novel *The Portrait of a Lady*. Generally, Harmon finds in Coburn’s frontispieces to the Edition an “otherness” captured in the image’s “blurriness” that is seen to coexist with conventional depictions of prestige. He writes,

As in *Portrait*, the representation of the otherness that haunts the scene of commodity fetishism—the sense that there is something inherently absurd or bizarre in granting such importance to objects and rituals—entices the viewers of Coburn’s photos to swing back and forth in melodramatic fashion, from an intense allegiance to the conventions of cultural distinction, to an equally intense estrangement from those same conventions. (314)

Furthermore, what he discerns in the frontispiece for the first volume of *The Portrait of a Lady* is exclusively the result of its interaction with the text: “… the capacity of Coburn’s photograph to imply this subtle aura of duty-driven anomie only comes to light when the picture is viewed in conjunction with James’s novel” (318).
Harmon claims that this frontispiece image displays the wealth and prestige of the English upper classes, and he indicates that, at the same time, this image serves to “de-idealize” these aristocratic connotations because of its blurriness and of other marks he finds in the image that interfere with it negatively (314). Moreover, for Harmon, the two aspects evoked by the photographic frontispiece point to the experience of the novel’s main character, Isabel Archer, who suffers the shattering of what she expects will bring her nobility and prestige. Drawing from the novel and comparing Coburn’s frontispiece *The English Home* to contemporary and conventional depictions of prestigious English mansions and to a sketch of a similarly elitist scene, Harmon finds in Coburn’s photograph a haunting otherness that recalls Isabel’s having to come to terms with both the positive and negative consequences of striving for cultural distinction (314). Harmon, like many other critics discussed, has shown how the frontispiece images are infused with the spirit of James’s texts: unlike other critics, he has seen in the frontispiece images a reflection of the moral dilemmas present in James’s fiction. Another way to explore a fracturing of the ideal is found by critic David McWhirter in the empty melancholy of the frontispiece images: the fragility of the Edition represents an invitation for the reader to bring his/her reading of the text to the image.

Taking the preface to *The Golden Bowl* as his framework for an analysis of the function of the frontispiece illustrations, in his article, “Photo-Negativity: The Visual Rhetoric of James’s and Coburn’s New York Edition Frontispieces,” McWhirter introduces another reading of these images alongside the familiar interpretations of the frontispieces as set stages for James’s fiction. He interprets the shy relationship of image to text articulated by James in the preface as a negative space, one that is both evocative and empty. Citing James’s comments about the image of the shop for *The Golden Bowl*, which states that the reader should be able to “read into it” the
visits of his characters, McWhirter says that the function of the frontispieces as images that are stage sets for the fiction is to invite readers to fill them with their readings of the texts but also that the opacity of the photographs reflect an “… unspeakable world from which the human has already disappeared …” (“Photo-Negativity” 109). This other reading of the frontispieces that he proposes is one that dwells on how the more negative characteristics of their emptiness make them appear terrifyingly inanimate—representations of a nonhuman material world—in comparison to the “rich sociality” of James’s fiction (108). He sums up the cultural and social consequences of the alternative function of the frontispiece images, stating that “the frontispieces insinuate just such a radical de-formation of the New York Edition’s ‘monumental’ assertions of self, authority, and civilization, that they work rather to dissolve the evanescent structures of identity, art and society” (109). He gives examples to illustrate his point of view using frontispiece images of some of the volumes of the New York Edition, including the frontispiece photogravure—titled Saltram’s Seat (Fig. 1.0)—for volume 15.

McWhirter considers this image melancholic and a memento mori for James’s good friend, the deceased George du Maurier, who sat with him on a bench like this one in Hampstead Heath. This frontispiece photograph is a particularly apt example of how, in addition to being the stage setting for the stories to follow, we can, according to McWhirter, read back into the image’s “eerie vacancy” and “felt absence,” the loss of his good friend. Situating this image in his larger argument about the New York Edition and the function of the frontispieces, McWhirter notices the fragility of representation in the contrast he sees in the image of the park bench between its “frontality” and its melancholic echoes, a reminder of the tension between the monumental and the evanescent in the Edition. A closer look at the relationship between this same frontispiece and several tales in volume 15 builds on the insights of the critics just
reviewed: that is, the stress placed on the common aesthetics of James and Coburn; James’s ambivalence about illustration and the nature of the photographic as well as his openness to it; the existence of complementary and conflicting features in the relation of the frontispieces to the texts of the Edition; the cultural and material features of the photographic frontispieces that reflect irreconcilable tensions in the Edition; and the experimental nature of the collaboration, which entails the critique it represents of popular illustration practices, especially visible—given the widespread illustration of tales in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—in the Edition’s volumes of tales. Selecting one volume of tales and their frontispiece illustration puts emphasis on the photographic image in relation to the short stories in a way that sheds light on the interactions possible when reading back and forth between visual and literary forms.

VOLUME 15: A PARK BENCH AND FIVE TALES

The exploration of dynamic interactions between Coburn’s photographic image of a park bench and James’s tales is the focus of the following discussion, which begins with some preliminary considerations about the frontispiece image; its caption, *Saltram’s Seat*; and the five tales on the literary life gathered in volume 15 of the Edition: “The Lesson of the Master,” “The Death of the Lion,” “The Next Time,” “The Figure in the Carpet,” and “The Coxon Fund.” The act of opening volume 15 requires taking a few steps that mark the distance between image and text. The frontispiece is first seen without its caption because the caption is printed separately on a tissue page that lies between the image and the title page of the volume. The caption becomes visible only when the tissue page is turned and laid over the frontispiece. At this point, the tissue

7 All page references to the tales gathered in volume 15 of the Edition are from Leon Edel’s *The Complete Tales*, volumes 7 and 9. Page references to the tales’ prefaces are from James’s *The Art of the Novel*. 

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veils the image and the title page is unveiled.  

(Fig. 1.0) The effect of seeing the frontispiece as an image without a caption accentuates its existence as an independent object and gives the viewer a chance to scrutinize it with no textual reference point other than its inclusion in the Edition. When the caption becomes visible, however, it anchors the image with what most readers would presume is an explanatory quotation from the adjoining text. But this is not the case. Written by James, the captions, with one exception, are not quotations from his text.

Indeed, the placement of the photogravure frontispieces in the New York Edition affirms the adjacency of image and text and, at the same time, suggests their independence, a configuration that is consistent with James’s explanation of the function of the photographic frontispieces in his preface to *The Golden Bowl*. James writes, “… the idea, that is of the aspect of things or the combination of objects that might, by a latent virtue in it, speak for its connexion [sic] with something in the book, and yet at the same time speak enough for its odd or interesting self” (*Art of the Novel* 333). In the case of the photogravure frontispiece for volume 15 of the New York Edition—in which the image of a park bench, *Saltram’s Seat*, is isolated from its caption as well as from the title page, the preface, and the five tales that follow--it could be argued, on the one hand, that this isolation of the image from the verbal texts it accompanies underlines a mainly decorative function. On the other hand, its unmooring also opens up the possibility of finding connections between the image and all of its accompanying texts.

The analysis of such connections is inspired by discussions of the James–Coburn collaboration from the point of view of photographic historians and theorists, by commentaries that focus on James’s participation in the construction of the Edition, and by imagetext analyses.

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8 This material description of volume 15 is the result of consulting the original New York Edition, published by Scribner’s, at the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library.
of diverse volumes of the Edition. Unlike that of the aforementioned critics, this analysis closely examines the relationship between the frontispiece and its adjoining tales in one volume. Rather than privilege the verbal or the visual, my study looks at the imagetext dynamic that binds them. I draw on critics Nadel, Harmon, and McWhirter, all of whom argue that something from the stories can be read back into the frontispiece photograph; however, I also suggest that something from the photograph can be read back into the stories. My aim is to explore the potential of this early experimental juxtaposition of one photograph and a group of short stories, starting with their most salient common feature, their constraining external frames.

The framing of a photograph and a short story is similar in the condensation and economy required to create both forms; it is, however, perceived differently: the photograph’s frame is seen immediately whereas the framing of the tale is only noticed once read and reflected upon. The fact that the image and tales of volume 15 are kept far apart increases an awareness of their seams that, in turn, prompts a reflection on the effects of how they are framed. The reverberations between the external borders of the frontispiece and the form of the tales underscore the formal weight of their framing. The most poignant frame of Coburn’s image is its external frame: a tight crop of a section of what appears to be a larger park. The crop serves to both reduce the scope of the scene and extend its range by how it echoes and contrasts with architectural spaces in the tales. On the one hand, the ‘tight’ frame evokes the constraints of writing spaces depicted in the tales, such as the windowless office where the master of “The Lesson of the Master” writes or even the circus ring that resounds with the oppressive forces of the public and the literary marketplace in “The Death of the Lion.” On the other hand, the cropped park scene suggests an opening: it points to the gardens in the tales where unrestrained and often crucial conversations between narrators, writers, and artists occur. Not surprisingly,
however, what is evoked can be revoked: the viewer’s awareness that the bench is empty and the
reader’s understanding of why the artists of the tales tend to be absent refers to the irresolution of
the dilemmas presented in the tales involving conflicts between art and market forces.

All five tales in this volume feel obsessively circular due to repetition within the tales, to
the intensity of their grouping, and to their unresolvable dilemmas. The circular constraints of
these tales are reminiscent of James’s own difficulties in restraining the extension of his stories, a
constraint he calls “… the rude prescription of brevity at any cost …” in the preface to “The
Lesson of the Master” (Art of the Novel 219). Indeed, the pressure to combine richness and
concision in the work of art is challenging for both the photographer and the writer of short
fiction. In volume 15, the juxtaposition of the anxious circular frames of the tales to the fixed
frame of the frontispiece highlights both the stillness of the photograph and the repetitive circular
motion that frames the tales. Of the five tales in the volume, the one in which motion is most
acutely felt as its frame is “The Figure in the Carpet.” The circularity of the narrator’s endless
searching for the impossible makes the inner movements of this tale feel like an external circular
frame. The largest frame of the imagetext resulting from the collaboration is the volume itself,
and pressures were exerted here, too, when the lists of novellas and tales proposed by James to
Scribner’s exceeded their requirements of word count per volume. When necessary, the editor
independently reconfigured James’s designs for the Edition.⁹ This rearrangement led to awkward
configurations in some volumes that affected the imagetext: at times, the frontispiece image is
not the one intended for all of the novellas and tales of a given volume. I chose volume 15 for the

⁹ See critic Michael Anesko’s 1995 essay and chapter 8 of his 1986 book, Friction with the Market, for the complex
publication history of the New York Edition and especially for the shifting negotiations with the publisher and
editors regarding the configuration of the volumes of short fiction (“The Eclectic Architecture” 155-160).
analysis of its photographic frontispiece and short stories because it is one of the volumes of short prose unaffected by Scribner’s reshuffling: Coburn’s frontispiece, Saltram’s Seat, was meant to accompany James’s five stories. A few insights from biographical information provide some clues about the mood of the photographed scene to enrich the analysis of its imagetext.

The backstory of the search for the frontispiece photograph for volume 15 is told by critics Jane Rabb and Leon Edel, both of who rely on biographical information about Coburn and James. In Rabb’s Literature and Photography: Interactions 1840-1990, her 1995 anthology on fiction and photography, we are given the story of James’s and Coburn’s quests for images in a summary of the highlights of the collaboration, as well as a placing together of the pages on the collaboration from James’s preface to The Golden Bowl, with excerpts from a chapter of Coburn’s autobiography, Illustrating Henry James, and with notes from Coburn’s BBC radio broadcast on the search for images with James in London. We discover details about the search for images in London from Coburn’s autobiographical writings, a search that Coburn calls the “most intimate and personal of all the questing for pictures” (Rabb 171). More particularly, Coburn recalls the search undertaken with James for the photographic image in Hampstead Heath. He writes that James had in mind a bench with tall trees in the background and that they searched for this scene in Hampstead Heath even though the image in volume 15 is meant to refer to a scene from the tale “The Coxon Fund,” which takes place in Wimbledon. According to Coburn, James seemed to know that they would not find the combination of a park bench and tall trees at Wimbledon, and since the mental image took precedence over matching the location of the image to the location in the tale, he tells us that James took him in a cab to Hampstead Heath.

Coburn’s memory of this search is exceptionally vivid: young and in awe of the older writer, a particular incident impressed him. Having to walk a far distance to recognize and capture the
scene James had in mind for the frontispiece, James left his “gold-headed walking-stick” with the driver so that he would wait for them to come back. Curiously, the central character of “The Coxon Fund” is found by the narrator on a bench in Wimbledon, his hands resting on a “gold-headed staff.” More echoes of James’s past that are related to his search for images with Coburn are disclosed in Leon Edel’s biography of James, *Henry James: The Master*. We learn from him that the park bench is like the one in Hampstead Heath on which James sat with his friend George du Maurier, who was no longer alive when James and Coburn found the scene of the bench in 1906: “On such a bench, and perhaps this very one, Henry James had sat, long ago, with George du Maurier, during their rambles on the Heath, talking of Paris and French novels” (Edel, *The Master* 337). Although James himself does not discuss the search for this particular photograph, in the preface to *The Golden Bowl* he refers generally to the search for images with Coburn in London as “amusing” and “instructive,” and he writes that, despite his negative views on illustration, he was seduced by “the mere pleasure of exploration” (*Art of the Novel* 176). This chapter presents multiple connections between the image *Saltram’s Seat* and the five stories in volume 15 and starts by reading something from the fiction back into the frontispiece image: it begins, then, with reading back into Coburn’s photographic frontispiece an image from James’s tale “The Coxon Fund.”

In this last tale of volume 15, James gives a scintillating visual image of central character Frank Saltram’s brilliant mind: “The sight of a great suspended, swinging crystal, huge, lucid, lustrous, a block of light, flashing back every impression of life and every possibility of thought” (“The Coxon Fund” 133). It is likely that Coburn had this verbal image in mind when he created the light effects of his frontispiece photograph for this volume, an image also attached to the last story by its caption, “Saltram’s Seat,” or perhaps attached to all of the tales since many aspects
of the predicaments in these stories can be read back into this image. The effects of James’s image of the crystal evoke a dynamic of reverberating movement between image and text—its power to oscillate and flash back impressions that intensify and enrich the reading and viewing experience. First I will consider what I call magical aftereffects—the oscillating effects between the tales and the frontispiece—in view of how they extend the treatment of James’s theme for the volume. Second, I look at how the frontispiece and the tales face each other as reverberating portraits wherein the play of light and sound between the photograph and the tales is examined, followed by a consideration of portraiture that involves bringing in the author’s portrait, the frontispiece photograph in the first volume of the New York Edition. The photographic frontispiece echoes the tales and, together, as reverberating portraits, they suggest a critique of popular photographic portraiture.

MAGICAL AFTEREFFECTS

Upon receiving copies of the first volumes of the New York Edition at the end of December 1907, James declared the Edition to be “felicitous”: he wrote to thank Scribner’s saying, “I am delighted with the appearance, beauty and dignity of the Book—am in short almost ridiculously proud of it” (Edel, Letters 4: 484). Writing at the same time to his agent, James B. Pinker, James reiterated his pleasure upon seeing the first two volumes. Expressing his gratitude to Pinker for his work, he described the volumes as “the purple volumes” (Horne 455-456). It is difficult to get a sense of the beautiful color James is referring to when he first saw the volumes because it has been impossible to obtain copies of Scribner’s first numbered edition.10

10 Although the color of volume 15 of the Edition consulted in the Berg collection at New York Public Library has waned, it is possible to see the reduced size of the photogravure frontispiece and thus to understand what the difference in quality would be between the prints originally made by Coburn that were seen by James and the diminished beauty of the frontispieces produced by the publishers.
Additionally, James comments on the reduced size of the photogravures in his preface to *The Golden Bowl*, intimating that their reduction in size lessened their beauty. He suggests that, although reduced, some retain their qualities: “… of those that have suffered least the beauty, to my sense remains great …” (*Art of the Novel* 331). What the actual Coburn photographs for the New York Edition might have looked like when James saw them as original prints is possible to imagine by looking at photogravures made by Coburn using his own press for his illustration of H. G. Wells’s collection of stories entitled *A Door in the Wall*, published in 1911. Unlike the New York Edition photogravures, these images were made from plates prepared by Coburn himself and printed under his supervision; furthermore, the images are large, six by eight inches, and are tipped into the rather big book necessary to accommodate them.

In comparison, the small size of Coburn’s New York Edition photogravures—roughly four and a half by three and three quarters inches—is due to the format his publishers, Scribner’s, used for this kind of deluxe edition at the time. The industrial reproduction of Coburn’s photogravures for the Edition is another factor that diminishes the quality of the prints, making them less impressive when compared to Coburn’s original photographs or to his custom printed photogravures, such as those he made for Wells’s stories and other illustrated books. However small, in their rich tonalities and contrasting hues, hazy diffusion of light, and indirect oblique angles, Coburn’s provocative frontispiece photogravures complement and contrast with elements in James’s stories in interactions that recall the radiating effects of the image of the crystal used by James to depict the brilliance of his main character’s mind in “The Coxon Fund.” The dynamic set in motion by the juxtaposition of image and texts in volume 15 of the Edition resembles this light source-in-movement in which crystal facets receive and project back
illuminating rays; the first exchanges between image and text appear when thinking about the image in its relation to its caption and to the titles of the tales.

The reader’s introduction to volume 15 of the New York Edition is Coburn’s photogravure frontispiece, a picture of a bench situated in a strangely lit natural setting. (Fig. 1.0) Unlike the other Edition frontispiece images—mostly of various types of urban architectural structures—this one presents the viewer with a frontally placed bench behind which are five tall trees and a bright horizon in a rural park setting. At first, this mysterious photograph reveals little other than wonder at why such an image is a frontispiece at all because it is dramatically uncharacteristic. Additionally, its oddity is heightened by its format: the depiction of a landscape in a framing more commonly used for portraits. James gave it a caption—“Saltram’s Seat”—that does not explain the mysterious quality of the image but instead serves to further heighten the viewer-reader’s bewilderment: it gives the viewer-reader a clue that will not anchor the image in the usual way because it does not refer to a place—as one might expect of the caption of a landscape image. Critic Jefferson Hunter formulates these expectations: “A photograph invites the written information which alone can specify its relation to localities, time, individual identity, and the other categories of human understanding” (6). What the caption does refer to is a bench found only at the very end of the last story in volume 15, “The Coxon Fund.” It thereby keeps the literary reference of the frontispiece somewhat of an enigma and encourages a search for meaning in all of the stories in the volume.

Saltram’s bench is assumed by the reader at the end of the tale entitled “The Coxon Fund” to be in Wimbledon, yet we know from Coburn’s autobiography that the depicted bench was actually located in Hampstead Heath. The fictional attribution of place to Coburn’s
photograph, its relocation to the Wimbledon of the short story, raises the question of the
indexicality of the photograph because, like a footprint in the sand, this image is a physical
impression of a bench in Hampstead Heath. Thus, the caption that places the image taken in
Hampstead Heath in Wimbledon is deliberately misleading from a strictly literal and
photographic point of view. James’s caption makes it fictional and poses the question of how
effective the photographic image can be as a setting for a place that it does not depict. James’s
success in using this photograph to point to the fictional setting of his story is possible because of
Coburn’s photographic aesthetics and expert craftsmanship: one aspect of his accomplishments
as a pictorial photographer was to make his images artistic by erasing any clues or details that
might situate them in a particular place. The photograph of the bench in Hampstead Heath is so
sufficiently generalized by Coburn’s imaginative rendition that it is practically impossible to
detect its location.

Like the caption, the titles echo the frontispiece in their enigmatic qualities and, unlike it, they contrast with the same image in their lightheartedness. Three complete titles appear on the
title page opposite the frontispiece photogravure: “The Lesson of the Master,” “The Death of the
Lion,” and “The Next Time.” The other two tales are incorporated as “And Other Tales.” The
titles of the tales are suggestive of children’s book titles, but, in a surprising twist, the reader will
discover that the stories they announce are quite serious and similar to the strange gravity of the
frontispiece. The irony in the titles is disclosed upon reading the tales and discovering the ruse
embodied in them: the contrast of their playfulness to the tragic situations they announce is
deceptive, and, moreover, they offer, in their mockery of popular literature, an expression of the
tension in the tales between serious art and popular art, a central theme of the stories in volume
15. Two instances in the tales reflect the enigmatic elements present in the titles and the frontispiece. In “The Lesson of the Master,” the young writer Paul Overt is tricked, or so it seems, by the more senior writer he admires into leaving London and foregoing his chances to court the young woman he loves in order to be free to write his novel. When he returns, however, the older writer—widowed in the meantime—is about to marry the young woman Overt is still in love with. Given his forthcoming second marriage, the Master’s advice—that great writing requires freedom from the social constraints of marriage and family—raises questions about his intentions regarding the young writer and the sincerity of his beliefs. The question of whether or not the lesson was deceptive is left unresolved.

Similarly, there is no way out for Ralph Limbert, the writer of the tale “The Next Time,” who needs and wants to write a bestseller but can only produce great novels that don’t sell. He is trapped in a predicament shyly suggested in the title, but in order to fully appreciate its irony, the story must be read. The dilemmas and paradoxes that James presents in his tales of the literary life are unresolvable, even when, at the end of the tale, it is made clear that the narrator has become fully aware of his participation in the very processes he condemns. What James writes in a letter to William Dean Howells in 1908 about the New York Edition prefaces is applicable to the effects he desired from the tales in volume 15: “They [the prefaces] are, in general, a sort of plea for Criticism, for Discrimination, for Appreciation other than on infantile lines …” (Horne 461). James’s satiric portrayal of the mass public, described as increasingly incapable of criticism and appreciation, correlates with the Sisyphean situations of his writer-characters, their inability to survive by producing great works of art. James is hopeful, however, and this is manifest in his work on the prefaces in general and more specifically in the preface to volume 15
where he states that the critical value of ‘operative irony’ in the tales lies in that “It implies and projects the possible other case, the case rich and edifying where actuality is pretentious and vain” (*Art of the Novel* 222). James guides the reader of the preface to “The Lesson of the Master” by alluding there to the ironic in his tales of the literary life, building on a sense of the ironic that has already been given the reader-viewer of volume 15 in the bewildering strangeness of the frontispiece image and its reverberations with its caption and the titles of the tales. It is, nevertheless, in the illuminating interactions between the frontispiece image and the texts of the tales in volume 15 that the most numerous and productive reverberations between text and image are found.

Coburn’s image of the empty bench seen in juxtaposition to James’s tales in volume 15 connotes the loss of camaraderie among artists by the light it throws both upon the existence of strong masculine bonds between the narrators and the writers or artists they admire and the impossibility of such relationships or, if the image is seen as a memento mori for Du Maurier, the loss of such relationships. The pleasure obtained from them and the uncertainty about their outcome appears metaphorically in Coburn’s image in its depiction of crepuscular light. Light in Coburn’s frontispiece is indeterminate: like twilight, it hovers between sunset and night or between full night and sunrise. It is likely that Coburn waited for the moment when he could best capture crepuscular light and that he used techniques of development and printing such as platinum and gum bi-chromate to give this shadowless image the timeless and bewilderling

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11 Coburn writes about the importance of light when he says, “The artist-photographer must be constantly on the alert for the perfect moment, when a fragment of the jumble of nature is isolated by the conditions of light or atmosphere, until every detail is just right” (Coburn 44).
In the tale, the narrator describes the young writer Paul Overt observing two contrasting facial expressions of the admired older writer Henry St George. To convey the contrast between the budding friendship and its eventual demise, the narrator uses twilight to portray the ambiguous feelings Overt will have to contend with regarding this relationship at the end of the story. In seeing a change of countenance in St George, from the quiet face Overt liked to the smiling face he didn’t, Overt’s negative reaction is described by the narrator: “[it] … resembled that of a person sitting in the twilight and enjoying it, when the lamp is brought too soon” (James, “Lesson of the Master 225). The rude awakening from the twilight state to bright light happens early in the story and foreshadows the crisis that will traverse this friendship when doubts are cast on the sincerity of the Master’s lesson.

In “The Coxon Fund,” the narrator, restless about the possible negative effects of the fund on Saltram, decides to wander on the Wimbledon Common at dinnertime and finds Saltram sitting on the bench. Just before sunset and until just before dawn, he spends this precious night—framed by crepuscular time—with Saltram and describes it as the experience where any problems he had about Saltram’s contradictory behavior in the past had vanished: he felt free to embrace him fully at last. This friendship, however, will be nipped in the bud since the reader discovers that Saltram dies soon thereafter. Although there are similar moments in the other stories in this volume that do not occur at twilight, there is an eroticism in the relationships.

12 Photo historian Mike Weaver remarks on the quality of light in Coburn’s photographs: “The light of winter afternoon suffuses many of Coburn’s pictures” (37). He also explains the technical means used by Coburn to render diffuse light. Coburn’s use of a particular lens “… gives to the distance in landscapes the shimmering quality of sunlight seen through a summer mist” (29).
among these men that feels ambiguous and unresolved, much like the indeterminate perception of light in Coburn’s image that makes its viewer hesitate about whether its capture of light on the horizon is the sun rising or falling. Frontispiece and tales come together in the selection of twilight as the mise-en-scène that signals ambiguity: the uncertainty of time and place in the photographic frontispiece echoes camaraderie experienced and lost as well as the perplexed states of the narrators.

In other ways, the interactions between Coburn’s frontispiece and James’s tales in volume 15 engage the viewer-reader in perceiving expectation and loss in terms of presence and absence such as in the absence of human figures in Coburn’s photographs and the presence of myriad vividly portrayed characters in James’s tales. The silence evoked by the absence of humans in the photograph is felt as the very opposite of the narrators’ abundant reminiscences in the stories’ episodes, dialogues, and incidents. Furthermore, the stillness of the photograph, intensified by its emptiness, clashes with the sense of movement in the stories, even when it is circular and feels like motion at a standstill. Evidence for how effects of absence and presence resonate as an oscillating dynamic in the frontispiece image and the tales is demonstrated by investigating how the absence of color in the black-and-white frontispiece image contrasts with and highlights the presence of color in James’s stories. And, the absence of sound evoked by the mute photograph clashes with sound evoked in the tales, pointing to additional complementarities and contrasts.

Despite its grey tonalities and diffuse light, the lack of color in Coburn’s black-and-white frontispiece strengthens the viewer-reader’s perception of color in James’s stories. Two examples come to mind to illustrate James’s strategic use of color, a usage made even more vivid
when thinking about it in contrast to the frontispiece image. Bright color combinations are used to foreshadow events in the opening scenes of “The Lesson of the Master.” Paul Overt, the young writer of “The Lesson of the Master,” is at a country house overlooking guests mulling in the garden and waiting eagerly for a glimpse of Henry St. George, a famous older writer Overt admires and wants to meet. What catches his eye at first is a figure that he tells us is not the writer but a woman “in the crimson dress which made so vivid a spot, told so as a ‘bit of color’ amid the fresh rich green” (James, “Lesson of the Master” 213). This figure, we learn a few lines later, is the older writer’s wife. Color hints at the irony in Overt’s mistaken identification of the red figure on the grass: it is the loud negative sign of her destructive influence on her husband, a quality that is soon disclosed in the story. A few pages later, St George is seen walking toward the garden with more guests, among whom is a strikingly beautiful young woman described using the same color combination: “… a tall girl, with magnificent red hair, in a dress of pretty grey-green tint …” (220). In this tale, the young woman becomes the desired object of both men in contrast to the older writer’s wife, who represents the social and financial pressures of family that make it impossible for St George to write great works, or so we are told. The greens and reds that describe the women foreshadow the fact that the young woman with the red hair and green dress will replace the writer’s wife, who wears a red dress: she marries him shortly after he is widowed. What is at stake in this exchange is the authenticity of the older writer’s advice to the younger writer, Overt, who when told not to marry and to write finds that St George, having suggested Overt leave London, has during his absence decided to marry the younger woman—to the despair of the amorous Overt. Coburn’s black-and-white image makes James’s reds and greens stand out in this story; likewise, the colors send the reader back for a fuller appreciation of the mood set by the lack of color in the photograph.
On the very first page of “The Coxon Fund,” purple slippers set the tone for the description of Frank Saltram’s unconventional behavior, dubious morality, and unattractive physical features. The narrator begins his physical descriptions of the brilliant orator with the color of the slippers he wore to dinner: “… new and predominantly purple, of some queer carpet-stuff …” (James, “The Coxon Fund” 119). The descriptions of Saltram’s physical features and his brilliant mind occur throughout the story, mirroring the bright hues of awkward purple and luminous gold, a contrast that points to the question posed in the tale, which is the difficulty the characters have in accepting that Saltram’s dubious moral conduct and his shabby, awkward physical appearance cannot be disassociated from his brilliance. His brilliance is described as the sound of his voice, but, more importantly, it is visible in his eyes and in light-filled images of his mind. The eyes are “great,” “splendid,” “tragic,” “lights on a dangerous coast,” and “they send out great signals”; in contrast, his body is almost repulsive: fat, middle-aged, with a hanging lip and thick nose, “he moves badly and dresses worse.” (“The Coxon Fund” 121) His massively ostentatious body is made to look ridiculous as he rides in his benefactors’ green landau with a white hat on and a lady’s small white shawl that is barely able to cover him.

Although color is used parsimoniously, its effect sharpens the perception of his physical features and, by contrast, the intensity of the reader’s awareness of his artistic genius is mightily increased. Toward the end of the tale, the narrator, now ready to accept Saltram with all of his faults, describes his encounter with him while walking in the Common, depicted as a “… many coloured Common in Wimbledon …” thus providing the reader with a different picture of the same Common said to be captured in the black-and-white frontispiece image (James, “The Coxon Fund” 174). The narrator finds Saltram sitting dejectedly on a bench and notices his “…
plump white hands folded on the head of a stick—a stick I recognized, a gold-headed staff that I had given him in throbbing days’” (174). Color here, white and gold, merge to foreshadow enlightenment, the narrator’s new way of seeing Saltram, and to oppose this new way of seeing to his earlier and the more common point of view, acting to hold on to Saltram’s brilliance while rejecting and trying to reform his unethical behavior. The colored Common, the golden and white colors of light, and the purple color of Saltram’s slippers are all set in contrast to Coburn’s grey, black-and-white frontispiece image whose caption, “Saltram’s Seat,” relates it to the moment of illumination at the end of the story. The narrator’s newfound knowledge is captured in this light while at the same time the photographic image announces, in its darker hues and emptiness, the fact that Saltram dies shortly after he is funded. Money is also associated with color in “The Coxon Fund.” It is a central element of this story as indicated by its title and, when Saltram’s words are depicted as gold coins, color is fused with sound. On the one hand, the shiny gold color of money figures as a symbol for Saltram’s radiant intellect; on the other hand, the sound of gold coins prompts a reflection on new reverberations discovered in the adjacency of the mute frontispiece and the vibrant use of sound in James’s tales.

Although neither frontispiece nor tales have audible sound, the muteness of Coburn’s image acts on the tales by making the sounds evoked by the words resound intensely. Harmony in the tonalities of the frontispiece point to musical sounds in the tales whereas contrasting black-and-white tonalities in the frontispiece invoke noisy sounds. Among the many types of sounds in the tales, two types tend to dominate: angelic musical sounds and distracting noise. Musical sounds exist in the titles of the works of great writers, such as Ralph Limbert’s commercially unsuccessful novel in “The Next Time” that is ironically called “The Major Key”; in descriptions
of great writing in the tales; and in the sound of the brilliant orator’s voice in “The Coxon Fund.” Sounds that are noisy suggest those things that distract and interfere with the work of great artists, such as the disturbances caused by the conduct of the bourgeois public whose common ear and poor artistic tastes are abundantly mocked in the tales. Although in the most general terms the frontispiece’s silence underscores the presence of sounds in the tales, Coburn’s photograph works differently with the tales, depending on its juxtaposition to sounds that are musical or to sounds that are noisy. When conjoined to musical sounds, the harmonious composition and soft grey, slightly out-of-focus atmosphere resonates with the beauty and artistry James attributes to his angelic sounds. The magical effects of the sound of Saltram’s words in “The Coxon Fund” are heard in his benefactors’, the Mulvilles’, “temple of talk,” where he gives his lectures. To stress the musicality of his oratory and to insinuate that the lectures aren’t profitable—an issue that troubles the narrator before his awakening—Saltram’s words are ironically compared to ringing coins: “… Saltram’s golden words continued to be the only coins that rang there” (James, “The Coxon Fund” 137). The comparison is ironic because, in the end, the money Saltram will get from the fund to continue his work will destroy him.

Another allusion to beauty and harmony in music occurs, in the same tale, when the narrator recalls the rapture that he experiences at one of Saltram’s lectures, describing his words as the anesthetizing music of the violinist Joseph Joachim. Musical harmony as great fiction or oratory is echoed in the subdued hazy atmosphere of Coburn’s frontispiece. The image, despite an overall moody grey tone and slightly blurry quality due to the use of a soft lens, does not, however, eschew contrast: it presents contrasting shades of light and dark in the differences between the shades of the sky, trees, the contours of the bench and ground. Contrast in blacks and whites can be attained in a grey photograph by looking for patterns of beautiful lines in a
given scene and moving the camera around until the forms emerge and details become minimized. Weaver, a photographic historian who has written on Coburn, informs us that Coburn applied insights from the use of darkness and light in Japanese art, a technique called ‘notan,’ and that Coburn capitalized on the effects of this technique in photography because composition in Japanese art is similar to the monocular vision of the camera (12-13). Coburn used a telephoto lens to foreground the bench, reducing the depth of field such that the bench appears overlaid on its background that, in turn, by minimizing detail, accentuates the emergence of contrasting forms. Finally, waiting for the right moment and quality of light allowed Coburn to capture this image in which modulating tones include both distinct light and dark patterns of lines and the moody grey hues of its misty atmosphere.

If harmony in the tonality of the frontispiece points to musical sounds in the tales, contrasting tonalities in the frontispiece invoke the noisy sounds of the same tales. Noisy sounds, like those of Mrs. Saltram’s shoes as she is described hovering over the scene and disrupting the work of her artistic husband or his benefactors, are reflected in the more anxious aspects of the frontispiece image. But perhaps the tale that best illustrates the negative or noisy qualities of sound is “The Death of the Lion.” A writer of great novels, Neil Paraday is caught up in a frenzy of publicity maneuvers when a newspaper article brings his latest novel and, especially his undiscovered genius, to the public eye. The newspaper publicizes the novel by calling it a firing gun: “…The Empire…fired, as if on the birth of a prince, a salute of a whole column” (James, “Death of the Lion” 85). When a journalist, Mr. Morrow, irrupts into Paraday’s private life, he does so with noise and abrupt gestures, large and bright like “some monstrous modern ship” and he pulls off “violently new gloves” as he brags loudly about his journalistic influence (87). Furthermore, Morrow’s penchant for noisy idle talk is inferred by his association with the
newspaper *The Tatler* and its most popular department, “Smatter and Chatter.” Once Paraday has become ‘a revelation’ in the press, he is mobilized by a bourgeois society woman, Mrs. Weeks Wimbush, whose name is a mouthful of noise and who is said to own a “universal menagerie” in which she exhibits her writer-victim as a circus act. She too is described in loud, violent terms: “She was a blind, violent force” and “She was constructed of steel and leather” (95). The contrasts in the dark and light tonalities of Coburn’s photograph that underscore the jarring noises in the tales also reflect tensions in the image, such as that of the very tall trees and low bench that result from its tight cropping and portrait framing.

Finally, Coburn chose to frame a small part of a very large park and, although the bench is not portrayed as closely as a human figure would be in one of his photographic portraits, he emphasized it by making it central, albeit at an oblique angle. Ironically, in common portraiture the bench would be a prop and not the subject of the image. Coburn and James’s public bench is placed in the lower part of the photogravure and behind it stand five tall dark-grey trees that are so tall that they press on the frame. These large shadow-like trees are in the background while the bench—made to look much smaller by the trees—is centrally placed and light enough to stand out and call attention to itself. Depicting this empty bench framed as a portrait—with its prop standing in for the sitter—mocks the common usage of theatrical props in popular portraiture. As the narrator of “The Death of the Lion” tells readers, the public and the press are only interested in the writer Paraday if they can make him present by making him a personality instead of valuing his writings. In the context of popular portraiture in the tale, being portrayed as a public figure is destructive whereas remaining invisible seems to be the only way to foreground the work of fiction itself, however unprofitable it might be. New interactions between
the frontispiece and the tales are seen to emerge when their interrelations gravitate around questions of portraiture.

REVERBERATING PORTRAITS

Coburn’s frontispiece image of an empty park bench is one of fifteen New York Edition photogravures framed in a ‘portrait’ format. It is not surprising that Coburn, known for his artistic photographic portraits, would frame most of his images for the Edition in this format; it is unexpected, however, that the fifteen photographic images are not portraits of people but of places and things pictured in much the same way as Coburn’s portraits of human beings. Coburn’s image for volume 15 is intensely mysterious: first, his empty bench contrasts strangely with the dramatic portrayal of five writers in James’s tales who struggle in despair because their works are so extraordinary; secondly, Coburn uses the same techniques for human portraiture to picture the bench and, in so doing, uncannily endows this material object with a spiritual presence. The ghostliness of this image renders emphatic what many photographic theorists have remarked about photographs, that they are inhabited by death. Indeed, the frontispiece echoes the deaths in four of the tales of writers who are unable to complete their work and who die unrecognized. Furthermore, as has been suggested earlier in a description of the dynamic of presence and absence in this imagetext, this frontispiece photograph is a memento mori for James: the bench depicted is reminiscent of the bench James sat on with his deceased friend, writer and illustrator Georges du Maurier, in Hampstead Heath. This frontispiece image is tinged with an air of finality: it echoes the great writer’s invisibility when faced, in James’s tales, with a public uninterested in serious fiction; it signals the writer’s willed absence, hinting at the refusal

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13 For details about Coburn’s portrait photography, see Weaver, and, for specific examples, see Coburn’s *Men of Mark* (London: Duckworth, 1913) and *More Men of Mark* (London: Duckworth, 1922).
14 Most photography critics would agree with Sontag that “Photography is the inventory of mortality” (70).
to be depicted as a celebrity; and it foreshadows the artist’s eventual destruction caused by not being able to resist the social and cultural pressures of the cult of personality.

The public and the journalists who write for popular audiences are responsible, in the tales, for turning artists and writers into celebrity figures. In these stories, celebrity entails a public focus on the artist’s personality with little or no consideration of the literary work. In addition, the cult of personality pictured in the tales thrives on the public display of the artist’s private life. The consequences for serious writers or artists who buy into marketplace demands are presented in the tales as ending their ability to produce great works of fiction: refusing to meet the public’s demands—or not being able to write popular fiction—spells the inability to sell and hence make a living as a writer. The focus on fame and celebrity goes hand in hand with celebrity portraiture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. An extreme and important example of this popular cultural phenomenon is the carte-de-visite photograph. Coburn portrayed an empty bench for the frontispiece image according to James’s instructions that his photographs not contain human figures, instructions that James formulated in his account of the collaboration in the preface to The Golden Bowl. In spite of the fact that the image is not actually a portrait, Coburn’s way of composing it recalls the portrait photographs he is famous for and that are, like all of his images, statements about the spiritual and artistic potential of photography. In his portrait photographs, Coburn sought to find an expression in the sitter’s face for what existed in his mind. Photographic historian Mike Weaver suggests that Coburn’s symbolism, his belief in a transformative relation between the physical and the spiritual, informs

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15 Photographic historian Geoffrey Batchen’s essay, “Dreams of Ordinary Life: Cartes-de-visite and the Bourgeois Imagination,” affirms the capitalist, industrial, and bourgeois nature of the carte-de-visite while at the same time suggesting that as a practice it carries capitalism’s contradictions in ways that should induce us to include in our approach the ways it might be seen to also undermine capitalism.
both his portrait and landscape photographs (28). As art, his portrait photography and this frontispiece image, when conceived as a kind of portrait, can be interpreted as a strong disavowal of the type of popular portrait photographs known as carte-de-visite photographs. Popular photographs of well-known individuals were collected, framed, or placed in albums by the middle-class public James decries in the tales. Not portraying anyone on the bench might then be construed as a necessary act of resistance against the cult of the writer’s personality as embodied in the photographic portrait, a critique of popular photography, a demand for privacy, freedom from social constraint, and a plea for the writer to be judged, above all, by the value of the literary work.

In “The Coxon Fund,” the narrator states that a portrait of Frank Saltram is impossible. He declares, “How the art of portraiture would rejoice in this figure if the art of portraiture had only the canvas!” (James, “The Coxon Fund” 120). Saltram’s mind is unportrayable in literary or painterly terms; it is his mind that matters and the depiction of its beauty challenges the writer or the artist. His mind is portrayed as a moving, shining crystal, as the phoenix known to elude capture; his ideas, when they are presented, appear in the form of sketches and drafts or other forms of writing that are not commodifiable. In contrast, his body is eminently portrayable as a photograph; it is described in bold detail and might even be construed as a caricature of the common photographic portrait when seen in the context of early twentieth-century portraiture. If this is true, a photograph of Saltram would be the kind of portrait least able to disclose the brilliance of his mind. The bench in Coburn’s image that is “Saltram’s Seat” echoes, in its materiality and commonality, his body, and in so doing, it emphasizes the dilemma posed by the contrasting material and spiritual aspects that make up this character. The accentuation of this question, in turn, prompts reflection on the difficulties of accepting the great artist Saltram as a
whole person: the problem is experienced by the other characters in the tale and it is through them that the reader gets a portrait of Saltram as a divided self. With the exception of the narrator, who in the end recognizes that what is important above all is the preservation of Saltram’s illustrious mind, the other characters find their efforts to coax Saltram to be the brilliant and moral person they want him to be realized by the financial and moral aims of the fund. However, when funded, Saltram stops lecturing and dies. Hence, the portrayal of the empty bench in Coburn’s frontispiece and the impossible portrayal of the main character of “The Coxon Fund,” Frank Saltram, are echoes and comments on the deceptions of portraiture when made to stand in for the finite representation of the artist and, by extension, the work of art. As James suggests in “The Art of Fiction,” the artist must be free in his or her choice of subject matter, unconstrained by prescriptions, and art must not be defined in advance of its making (578). Henry St George, The master of “The Lesson of the Master” and Neil Paraday, the lion in “The Death of the Lion,” both pay the price, albeit differently, of giving up this freedom.

Another way of looking at the interconnections between Coburn’s image of an empty bench, James’s stories, and the photographic is to imagine this artistic depiction of a common park bench as a satire of the middle-class photographic portrait, using popular photographic portraiture as metaphor to mock the public that is, according to the tales, the main source of the serious artist’s misery. This metaphor dramatizes the way Neil Paraday, the great writer character in “The Death of the Lion,” is devastatingly turned into a celebrity. The public exposure of this writer, depicted from its beginning as a grotesque circus act, is reinforced by being set in another context, that of a painter’s studio where he is taken by his malefic benefactors for a celebrity portrait. James’s description of the painter’s studio satirizes the desire of the bourgeoisie to imitate the aristocracy by having their portraits painted, but in its
technological and exhibitionist atmosphere, this painter’s studio also brings to mind the photographer’s studio where celebrity photograph portraits, much admired by patrons and onlookers, typically adorned the walls. The studio in “The Death of the Lion” is described as “… a circus in which the man of the hour … leaped through the hoops of his showy frames almost as electrically as they burst into telegrams and ‘specials’” (“Death of the Lion” 104).

In another tale, and referring specifically to portrait photographs, the narrator of “The Next Time” uses this imagery to mock the middle-class pretensions of the serious writer character Ralph Limbert’s mother-in-law, whose social needs pressure the writer to attempt to write popular novels to satisfy her family aspirations even when it is clear that he can only write unsalable masterpieces. The narrator visits his friend Limbert’s home and, as he waits to be received in the woman’s drawing room, he sees some hanging photographic portraits and presents them as a sign of ominous portent: “In her [Limbert’s wife] mother’s small drawing-room, a faded bower of photography fenced in and bedimmed by holding screens out of which sallow persons of fashion with dashing signatures looked at you from retouched eyes and little windows of plush, I was left to wait long enough to feel in the air of the house a hushed vibration of disaster” (James, “The Next Time” 195). Limbert’s loss of employment, his inability to provide for his family by writing, his masterpieces that don’t sell, and the endless failure of his attempts to write profitable popular fiction are what the narrator describes as his sense of disaster. As a mockery of the bourgeois taste and the aspirations of the mother-in-law, the frames called “little windows of plush” echo the “showy frames” of the portrait studio in “The Death of the Lion”: such verbal images about framed portraits clash dramatically with Coburn’s image and make the emptiness of the frontispiece portrait of a bench another ironic commentary on bourgeois self-fashioning.
Thinking about this image and the texts of the tales as reverberating portraits highlights James’s ironic depictions of journalism and the modern mass public; the satiric and oblique commentary on bourgeois portraiture that is intensified by the adjacency of Coburn’s image and James’s tales is one facet in the description of the tragic destiny of the artist who gives in to the public’s demands for personality at the expense of the literary work. Strangely, despite the great amount of work James put into the preparation of the New York Edition—most notably in the revisions and prefaces—the deluxe edition of a writer’s oeuvre is a luxury commodity destined not primarily to be read but to be put on display in a library as a beautiful and expensive object, a mark of its owner’s access to and display of high culture.\textsuperscript{16} Although the history of the New York Edition and its contradictions is not the focus of this discussion of image and text, the question of portraiture in the tales, obliquely mirrored in the photographic frontispiece of volume 15, warrants bringing into the conversation the portrait frontispiece image of Henry James in volume 1 of the Edition and examining its mirroring oscillations with Coburn’s frontispiece “Saltram’s Seat” and James’s tales of the literary life. (Fig. 1.1) This new intertextual relationship between the two frontispiece photographs and the tales of volume 15 resonates with the statements of those critics who have scrutinized the Edition, focusing on its contradictions and the manifold ways this deluxe edition points to crises in the self-fashioning of its author. Echoing these crises, the two frontispiece images and the tales—an empty bench that looks like a portrait of no one, the profile portrait of an author looking away from the photographer and the

\textsuperscript{16} Writing about deluxe editions and the elite cult of the ‘well-made book,’ Culver remarks, “... the space the author’s volumes occupied on the shelves of their well-appointed libraries was supposed to represent materially both the writer’s contribution to culture and the buyers’ own status as collectors rather than consumers of literature” (“Ozymandias” 44-45).
viewer, and tales portraying the downfall of great writers—portray the very opposite of the monumental aspirations embodied in deluxe complete editions such as the New York Edition.

In spite of the fact that interest for complete editions was waning in the early twentieth century, the publishers of the James’s New York Edition, Scribner’s, touted it as a monumental accomplishment. In December 1907, just before the first volumes appeared, Scribner’s made great claims for the importance of this edition in The Book Buyer, their trade magazine, placing strong emphasis on three innovative features of the Edition: the revisions, the prefaces, and Coburn’s photographic frontispieces. James’s revisions were presented as giving his work “a complete unity of effect;” the prefaces were described as new and outlines of their themes were given; finally, much was said about the photographs, and Alvin Langdon Coburn was called the finest photographer “now living” (Book Buyer 212-213). The success of the Edition seemed inevitable for James who, upon receiving the first volumes, declared his delight in their appearance and felt assured of the publication’s impact and its financial profitability. However, the Edition did not sell and, consequently, its failure to make money and gain the reader recognition James hoped for was all the more devastating for him given the amount of time and work he had invested in its special features, including the production of the photographic frontispieces. However, the same features that were advertised by Scribner’s—photographic frontispieces, revisions, and prefaces—are what fuel the continued discussion of what is now seen as an unconventional deluxe edition; recent critical commentaries ranging from an exploration of the ambiguities in James’s construction of himself as an author to considerations of the social factors influencing the formation of the Edition abound.

In contrast to James’s ultimately unorthodox deluxe edition, the more conventional complete edition of Ivan Turgenev’s works, introduced by James and published just a few years
earlier in 1903, also by Scribner’s, provides visual evidence of the non-conventional nature of the New York Edition, in particular of its approach to illustration. The first volume of Turgenev’s edition contains a more classical photographic frontispiece of the author looking directly at the viewer; hand-drawn, traditional illustrations constituting the other volume frontispieces; and some pictures within the texts that are made to dramatize character and plot and to furnish the viewer-reader with the expected visual depictions of figures in textual settings that are accompanied by captions taken directly from Turgenev’s text. The only illustrations in James’s New York Edition, contradistinctively, are photogravure frontispieces made from Coburn’s photographs, one for each of the twenty-four volumes. James developed his well-known thoughts on illustration, on the advantages of choosing photographic frontispieces, and on his participation in the collaboration with Coburn in his preface to *The Golden Bowl*. One of the conditions that made photographic illustrations acceptable to James was, as he says, that the relation of the image to the tale “… should … plead its case with some shyness, that of images always confessing themselves mere optical symbols or echoes, expressions of no particular thing in the text, but only of the type or idea of this or that thing” (*Art of the Novel* 333). It is suggested that the shy relationship between photographic image and text asserted by James in the preface does, in fact, reflect the relationship between the frontispiece and the tales in volume 15 and makes possible a process of interpretation by virtue of which they are made to illuminate each other. Moreover, this quality is made even more perspicuous when the photographic frontispiece portrait of Henry James in volume 1 is juxtaposed to the frontpiece photograph *Saltram’s Seat* and the tales of the literary life.

The frontispiece photogravure portrait of Henry James for the first volume of the Edition is a profile portrait of the author in a meditative moment; his bust-sized portrait is framed from
the top of his head to mid torso. Symmetry is suggested by an upper light-filled triangle that contains his head in profile and a lower dark triangle in which his torso is barely visible. The dividing line between the two is suggested by the bold white of James’s shirt collar. In the profile portrait James’s gaze directs the viewer toward the text, specifically to the title page of the first novel of the Edition. The light gray and soft focus depiction of his large head in profile boldly insinuates James refusal to let the viewer look directly at him, making it impossible to treat this image as a commodity that would turn its subject into a personality. The light on his large forehead directs the viewer to the prominent significance of the mental and spiritual properties of the writer, properties that, as implied in the tales of the literary life, must only be known in an engagement with the literary work. Shyness is expressed in both frontispieces, the portrait of James and the photograph of the empty bench, as absorptive moments whereby the viewer, denied a frontal photographic presence of the author of the Edition just as he or she is denied a figure on the bench called “Saltram’s Seat,” is directed to the bold presence of the caption of the frontispiece portrait—the author’s signature—and to the dramatic verbal portrayals of character in the five tales of volume 15. Shyness as an oblique stance is intimated by the rich ambiguity of James’s style, underscored in his preface to The Golden Bowl. In the first sentence of the preface, James describes his stubborn attachment to an “indirect and oblique view of [my] presented action …” (Art of the Novel 327), a description that fits his presentation of the situations in the tales of the literary life and that, in photographic terms, applies to the angles, lighting, and framing used by Coburn in both photogravure frontispieces. The intensity of the play of absences and presences accentuated in reverberations resulting from the juxtaposition of the image and the short stories of volume 15 mirrors the oscillation between shyness and boldness in the photographic portrait of himself that James selected for the first volume of his edition. In turn,
Perhaps, the shy echoes in the frontispiece images along with their bold corollary stances can be seen to reflect the ambiguities inherent in the compromise on illustration that James was pressured to make when he accepted the project of preparing a deluxe selective edition of his oeuvre. James had to compromise because illustrations were required in deluxe editions at the time of the publication of the New York Edition, and illustrated literature, primarily in magazines and newspapers, was expected and more profitable for publishers. As noted earlier, James’s correspondence with Scribner’s about the illustration of the Edition shows that while he was testing out Coburn by asking him for some images he was also considering “twenty drawings of passages in the tales” by a good artist recommended by Scribner’s (Edel, Letters 408). The correspondence indicates that James expected to have hand-drawn illustrations in the Edition but also indicates that, somewhat fortuitously, he found a way out of using hand-drawn illustrations and hence of not succumbing to the presence of illustrations on pages inside his narratives by his chance encounter with Coburn. It is the novelty of using photography and, more importantly, of positioning the photogravure in the place of the frontispiece that allows the image and the tales to establish and refine each other’s meanings. The distance between the frontispiece and the texts in the volumes of the New York Edition accentuates James’s general idea that the image should exist in relation to the novel or stories and, at the same time, have a life of its own as a beautiful object. In his remarks on illustration in the preface to The Golden Bowl, he recounts how he searched with Coburn for photographic subjects and how they discovered “the idea … of the aspect of things or the combination of objects that might, by a latent virtue in it, speak for its connexion [sic] with something in the book, and yet at the same time speak enough
for its odd or interesting self” (Art of the Novel 333). The dynamic and illuminating exchanges between Coburn’s frontispiece image and James’s short stories are made possible precisely because the image does not interfere with or interrupt the tales. What their adjacency does instead is to throw into relief the way they mirror each other and resonate in the enigmatic quality of their rich compactness.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of dynamic exchanges between Coburn’s photographic frontispiece and James’s short stories in volume 15 of the Edition, an early example of the photographic illustration of short stories, has shown that a mirroring of their effects not only enhances the understanding of each art form but also raises questions beyond the work that challenge the viewer and reader’s habitual ways of seeing and reading. Those who have written on the short story as a literary form, including James, despite his preference for the ‘nouvelle,’ remind us that its power lies in its ability to successfully commingle density and brevity such that it is perceived as complete as a picture, and yet, because of its fragmentary nature, it tends to appear as an incomplete picture. Paradoxically, the unfinished qualities of the experimental short story constitute its richness and its potential to point beyond itself and thus to invite and challenge the reader to think more deeply about the form itself and about any larger implications it might suggest. An artistic or experimental analog photograph must also contend with finding how to capture and transfigure a fragmentary scene in one frame such that a striking combination of elements in the image, whose frame intimates completeness as containment, is able to prompt reflection on the photograph itself as a constructed work. This kind of analog photograph thus encourages its viewer to break, albeit momentarily, with the habitual way of seeing photographs.
as windows on the world and to think of it instead as a commentary on the world. In the analysis of volume 15 of the New York Edition, certain qualities of Coburn’s photographic frontispiece have been shown to highlight features in James’s short stories that, in turn, have pointed back again to aspects of the photograph. Conceived as a juxtaposition of portraits, the photograph and the short stories have thrown light upon issues of photographic portraiture underlining the difference between the artistic portrait that is oblique and suggestive, like the characters portrayed in James’s stories and Coburn’s empty bench, and the more common photographic portrait that is frontal and literal, like the point of view of some of James’s characters in the stories and the more popular photographs of the period that we are familiar with and that Coburn disavowed.

James and Coburn did not consciously set out to create an imagetext such as the one analyzed here in order to produce an alternative form of literary illustration, but the fact that they shared aesthetic principles and artistic courage made possible the construction of a unique and original model. Despite the fact that James had worked with graphic illustrators for his travel books and that his novels and stories were often illustrated—much to his discontent—when serialized or published in illustrated magazines, his encounter with Coburn and the decision to illustrate the New York Edition with photographic frontispieces engendered a unique and exemplary experience. The decision to use photographs allowed James to participate actively in their production, something that would have been impossible if he had chosen a graphic artist. It is undeniable that James’s participation influenced Coburn’s work, but it is equally indubitable that without Coburn’s sophisticated knowledge of photography and his craftsmanship there would not be continued interest in the collaboration and its products. Furthermore, the decision to illustrate the Edition exclusively with photographic frontispieces so as to separate and
inevitably connect images and texts—the construction of photographic images according to James’s idea that they echo something in the stories and remain somewhat independent—and Coburn’s ability to capture, manipulate, and transfigure architectural and landscape photographs are precisely the features that enabled the discovery, in volume 15, of dynamic interchanges between Coburn’s image and James’s stories.

Although it cannot be said that the visuality of James’s short stories such as those in volume 15 is closely related to the growing presence and influence of photographic images in the late nineteenth century when they were written, the James–Coburn collaboration is more fully valued when it is located—as some photographic historians have done—in the context of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century developments in photography. In this context, the photographic illustration of the New York Edition is nonconventional and groundbreaking. Furthermore, it is the exploratory nature of the juxtaposition of Coburn’s photograph and James’s short stories, of the frontispiece photograph itself and of the stories themselves, that highlights the visuality of both forms. The analysis of one volume of this experimental project demonstrates that a conjoining of image and text that does not make the visual subservient to the verbal makes visible the innovative qualities of the collaboration, qualities that have the potential to generate new approaches to literary illustration. In these new approaches, the visual image interacts dialogically with the text(s) it illustrates. In the mid twentieth century, a time when the conjoining of photographic images and letterpress becomes even more commonplace and when illustrated literature is replaced by cinema, the relationships between photographers and writers or between photographs and stories changes dramatically.

In the same experimental and exploratory spirit of the model of literary illustration initiated by James and Coburn, the mid twentieth-century photographically illustrated short
stories in book format examined in the next chapter reveal new ways of working against the

grain of conventional illustration. Instead of resisting the use of images as interruptions of

narrative, they creatively exploit interferences between image and text: one, Roy DeCarava’s

photographic illustration of a short story by Langston Hughes, draws on the photo-essay format

of the 1930s to juxtapose a visual and a verbal story; the other, a book of short stories illustrated

by its author, Donald Barthelme, uses surrealist collage techniques to underscore the visuality of

the verbal and the discursive nature of the visual. Unlike the relationship of Coburn’s image and

James’s stories, where a dynamic is set in motion by the fact of their separation, exploratory

illustrations of the short story in the mid twentieth century capitalize on and play with the

commingling of image and text.
CHAPTER TWO
SHORT STORIES COMPOSED WITH WORDS AND PICTURES
Roy DeCarava, Langston Hughes, and Donald Barthelme

INTRODUCTION

Progress in printing and the ubiquity of mass-reproduced photographs in the press and elsewhere announce an increasingly visual and photographic mid- to late-twentieth-century social and cultural context in the United States. On a somewhat smaller scale and in response to questions posed by the new context, experimental spatiotemporal combinations in plastic arts, music, and cinema emerge and can be seen to exert an influence on the form and content of the short story. Among the plethora of short stories in this period, both traditional and innovative, a few imagetexts stand out as short experimental narrative constructions. Nonetheless, innovative literary short stories were rarely illustrated, which may have stemmed from their authors’ wishes to distinguish their writing from other short fiction that was deemed less literary, such as children’s books, journalistic stories, and various forms of graphically illustrated popular stories. Despite the lower literary value generally ascribed to prose that contained visual and illustrative elements by some writers and critics, the twentieth-century short story, like twentieth-century fiction in general, borrowed generously from these other forms of writing as well as from photography, cinema, and music.

In this chapter, two mid- to late-twentieth-century writers of short stories are considered: Langston Hughes, whose short story “The Sweet Flypaper of Life” was written and published in 1955 with photographer Roy DeCarava, and Donald Barthelme, who published collage narratives in magazines and in book collections of short stories in the 1960s and 1970s. Although
most literary short story writers in this period construct their stories without using pictures, Langston Hughes, in collaboration with Roy DeCarava, and Donald Barthelme creatively conjoined text and image. It is not surprising that Hughes and Barthelme would produce experimental imagetext narratives, given their extensive experience as journalists, critics, writers of children’s books, and their involvement in collaborative publications with illustrators. They were also well versed in cinema either as writers and/or critics and drew inspiration from the musical forms of the blues and jazz. Hence, it is not surprising that they easily and productively crossed genres and freely experimented with literary forms. Langston Hughes and Roy DeCarava’s story, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, was the earliest of these publications.

In 1954, sensing affinities between his work and that of Langston Hughes, photographer Roy DeCarava showed Hughes the photographs he had taken while on a Guggenheim fellowship. Hughes was enthusiastic and eager to help publish the Harlem photographs as a photobook, and Hughes’s publisher, Simon and Schuster, eventually suggested a publication of DeCarava’s photographs, but only when accompanied by a Hughes text. Hughes selected 140 photographic images from the more than 300 prints that DeCarava had given him and wrote a short story as a montage of photographic images and text, making this the first fictional photo text by and about African Americans. Contemporary critics were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the book. It was described as “the rolling out of a short story in photographs and text,” and the collaboration between the writer and the photographer was celebrated for the

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17 Both Hughes and Barthelme wrote short stories about jazz; blues and free jazz are present in different ways in their writings as well as in DeCarava’s photographs, and Hughes and Barthelme wrote film scripts and reviews. Cinematic techniques such as the jump cut and the varying rhythms possible from film editing and music are present, often visually, in their writing.

18 The following statement by Ings—“... Hughes’ book was the first fictional photo text and the first major photographic publication to examine black life from the inside” (40)—is consistent with what Hughes’s biographer, his critics, and DeCarava’s critics have said.
complementarity of the images and the text; the photographs were seen to expand on what was said in words, a statement that confers a degree of autonomy to the photographs because it signals their independent contributions and establishes an equal (and unconventional at the time) relationship between the photographs and the text.

Unlike Hughes’s and DeCarava’s collaborative work, Donald Barthelme composed his short stories alone, combining words, typography, and pictures in collages where all three forms share equally in the telling of each imagetext. Barthelme’s collage narratives are evidence of his deep immersion in the world of visual art, of his keen interest in contemporary cultural technologies, and his preoccupation with the loss of meaning and critical content in the language of his era. In interviews, he states the importance of the principle of collage and of the fragment in both literature and art and remarks on how surrealism inspired the construction of his own visual collages. Critic William Warde Jr. reaffirms this: “… Barthelme’s work is … in the main, based on the collage or mixed media view that characterizes so much of contemporary art. It should also be noted that Barthelme is actually constructing collages himself …” (51). The cultural context of the 1960s and 1970s played a key role in such narratives since this era was, as critic Michael Heitkemper-Yates says, a time of “widespread incorporation of collage theory into the praxis of modern literature” (1), and, as critic Louis Menand suggests, it was a moment of experimentalism in literature (68). For Barthelme, stories composed as visual and verbal collages would appear as whole units, visible at a glance, and would hence partake in the power of the immediate and sustained impact of the visual art object. Max Ernst, Joseph Cornell, Kurt Schwitters, and, most importantly, Robert Rauschenberg were critical influences from the art world in which Barthelme was an active participant for most of his life in a variety of
functions. Barthelme was attracted to the messiness, unpredictability, and unconventionality of Rauschenberg’s work. The found objects placed on Rauschenberg’s canvases generated infinite meanings, an effect Barthelme sought to replicate in his short stories. Emphasizing form in Barthelme’s stories, critic Wayne Stenger writes, “… from the painters he learned to see the short story form as a canvas capable of displaying surreal objects” (3).

Secondly, Barthelme was attentive to the influence of photography, film, and television on literature: in an interview with critics Charles Ruas and Judith Sherman, he stresses the possibilities of renewing language and literature with, for example, the use of cinematic montage or the jump cut, techniques that drive the composition of Barthelme’s stories (Barthelme, “Interview with Charles Ruas and Judith Sherman” 213). These technologies accelerated the tempo of everyday life and storytelling and posed a challenge to writers such as Barthelme, who responded by mimicking the new tempo in his storytelling with parodic twists. Barthelme stopped publishing stories with visual collages in the late 1970s when a reviewer of his book Great Days noted with pleasure that these new stories had no pictures. He continued, however, to create stories using verbal collages where a stress on the sound and shape of words and their use as quotations underline the visuality of language, a feature that is further intensified in his stories by strange verbal juxtapositions and odd sentences.

Despite the fact that both writers and the photographer drew on twentieth-century, New York City urban culture to construct their imagetext short stories, Hughes’s and Barthelme’s

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19 Barthelme’s biographer, Tracy Daugherty (Hiding Man), and his wife, Helen Barthelme (Donald Barthelme: The Genesis of a Cool Sound), document his participation in the art world both in Houston and in New York City. In an interview with O’Hara, Barthelme comments on the influence of painters on other artists: “... American painters since the Second World War ... have been a laboratory for everybody” (Barthelme, “Interview with John O’Hara” 278).

20 Barthelme discusses Rauschenberg and his influence in his essay “Being Bad” (184-186).

21 In his interview with O’Hara, Barthelme identifies Diane Johnson as this reviewer and admits that he did not realize at the time that his “Max Ernst collages” were no longer appreciated (Barthelme, “Interview with John O’Hara” 290).
stories differ in their choice and aesthetic arrangement of materials, in the circumstances of their publication, and in the extent to which they use actual photographs in their stories. Photographs are just one of the many elements Barthelme uses to construct his visual/verbal collages; he also includes clippings from magazines, journals, and catalogues; cut-outs from Victorian and nineteenth-century engravings; perspective studies; and a variety of typographic elements. Images and text in Barthelme’s short stories appear as alternating blocks of collaged visual material placed on the page, juxtaposed in varying ways to blocks of text and typographic objects. In contrast to the occasional use of photographs in Barthelme’s imagetext collages, the visual images in DeCarava and Hughes’s *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* are all photographs. Displayed together on the pages of the book in varying positions and sizes, the photographs and the story draw from the artists’ own experiences as members of the African American community in Harlem to picture and narrate the life of a fictional Harlem family.

Although Barthelme’s collage stories and *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* are different in many ways, they have several features in common, most notably that the visual images are on equal footing with the verbal text. The imagetext short story is a new context for the photographs or pictures, one in which the visual images are juxtaposed to unexpected and often unrelated verbal texts. Secondly, the verbal and visual materials used to construct these stories are drawn from the twentieth-century urban environment and its popular and commercial artifacts. Thirdly, music—the blues or jazz in particular—is deployed in the alternation of image and text and in the overall framing of the stories.

A discussion of these unusual and experimental stories reveals the exceptional visual and aesthetic potential of the short story form and, at the same time, points to the rich possibilities open to the short story in its current and future multimedia incarnations. The juxtapositions of
words and pictures in these stories give the reader/viewer the chance to more acutely scrutinize
the formal, visual attributes of the short story. The increased attention demanded of the readers
by these imagetexts dramatically distances them from the story. An examination of the interplay
of image and text in these composite works illustrates how their effects sharpen the
reader/viewer’s critical eye and direct it toward a more immediate, active, and focused
engagement with the story’s artistic form.

_The Sweet Flypaper of Life_ and Donald Barthelme’s collage narratives demonstrate the
powerful role of the visual and the spatial in shaping the contemporary twentieth-century short
story, which, for the most part, had been neither illustrated nor told conjointly with words and
pictures. Three features discussed by photographic theorists about the photograph’s social and
artistic nature are seen as key aspects of these stories: its intrinsic ambiguity, its status as
document or fiction, and its framing. The impact of a short story will be broadened by enigmatic
effects if the dialectical interplay of the photographs or pictures retain their ambiguity in the
imagetext short story.

**INTERMEDIAl DYNAMICS**

In _Another Way of Telling_, critic John Berger explains that a photograph without words is
essentially ambiguous because it represents a moment taken out of continuity, whether of history
or of a life story, and because there is a gap between its moment of recording and its moment of
viewing (87). Similarly, ambiguous and enigmatic situations are key features of the short story,
the sparks that ignite and generate meanings due to the density of the work and the impact of the
story’s formal and tight framing. Ambiguity is achieved in the short story by its compressed and
compact construction as well as its fragmentariness—qualities that serve to hold back meanings
often implicit from the start and often left to the imagination at the end. The discussion of the interplay between image and text in these short stories rests on reflections about the conjoining of the re-contextualized images, photographic or pictorial, used in these stories with the accompanying verbal texts to create the tense and enigmatic qualities required to ensure the explosive and radially expansive power of the story. The interplay between the verbal and the visual is based on equality in the relationship of image and text and on an understanding of the autonomy of the visual image. The autonomous image resists the verbal text, and in so doing, it opens up new narrative dimensions while still existing within the frame of the story; instead of serving as anchor, the text enters into a dynamic and playful exchange with the visual image.

Thinking about these imagetext short stories as cultural artifacts that are defined by their pictorial images and verbal texts in dialectical interplay is a critical and unconventional point of view indebted to the theoretical work of literary critic W. J. T. Mitchell.²² Approaching these stories—and all media—as hybrid constructions on Mitchell’s terms leads to the discovery of the interpretive possibilities that emerge when the visual image is seen to defy the words that are usually meant to explain and control it. Concomitantly, an understanding of the infinite visual dimensions of the verbal text is enhanced by perceiving and exploring the porosity of the borders between the visual and the verbal.

This section probes the ways in which these images exist in a dynamic and often surprising relationship to the verbal text, one where image and text either stand as contrast or complement, or even as both at the same time. Barthelme’s imagetext collage stories and Hughes and DeCarava’s *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* share a commitment to staging unconventional

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²² See W. J. T. Mitchell’s *Picture Theory* and/or *Iconology* for how his term, the *imagetext*, embodies a dialectic of exchange and resistance when visual images and verbal texts are co-present. In this dynamic, the images are neither merely illustrative nor evidential and the text is neither merely a caption nor an explanation.
juxtapositions of image and text that playfully engage the enigmatic potential of the arrangement of their materials in order to incite the interest of the reader/viewer and to awaken his or her critical capacities. The cover page of the first edition of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* exemplifies how provocative combinations of image and text momentarily confound the reader/viewer by simultaneously inviting and keeping him or her at a distance.

*THE SWEET FLYPAPER OF LIFE: PIVOTAL IMAGETEXTS*

At first glance, image and words, and especially the title, induce the reader/viewer to enter the work; yet, at the same time, the image and words on the cover page of the first edition of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (Fig. 2.0) interrogate the reader/viewer, inviting reflection on the possible discrepancies between what is read and what is seen. When the text and image on the cover page complement each other, they stress the resilience of African Americans, from the very young, as represented on the cover page, to the much older narrator whose words we read. The written text states that, upon being given notice of her death by a messenger of the Lord, Sister Mary Bradley, the narrator and main character, is not ready to die quite yet. Directly below the title and above the names of the authors and the beginning of Mary’s monologue, the reader/viewer encounters a close-up of the big brown eyes of her very young grandchild, eyes that look back at the reader/viewer and address him or her with determined inquisitiveness.

The suspense and tension suggested by the gaze returned in the photograph animates the oscillations on the cover page such that they intrigue and entice the reader/viewer to open the book. Mary, the narrator, tells the story of her family, interwoven with visual and verbal

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23 All of the photographic images and texts that appear as figures in the illustrations section as well as the page number references to Hughes’s texts in this chapter are from the 1955 paperback edition of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (DeCarava and Hughes).
descriptions of Harlem and its inhabitants, but she is not pictured until the very last page of the story. Mary’s presence as voice and her absence as image keeps the reader/viewer guessing throughout the story as the tension—embodied in the conjoining of her words and the photographic images that never depict her—mounts over what she might look like and whether or not she will die. The story ends where it began but with a twist: Mary ends the text with a statement that signs her photographic portrait; she says, “Here I am.” (DeCarava and Hughes 98) Because of her visual absence, the reader/viewer must get to know her as a speaking subject before seeing her physically. This tactic, most persuasively staged and experienced by the tensions between image and text, sets the tone of the story and presents one of its aims: a fictional portrayal of Harlem and its inhabitants by African Americans that challenges racist, mass media representations.

In addition to understanding how image and text in this short story challenge stereotypical ways of thinking and seeing, the conjoining of the visual and the verbal in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* can be ironic, particularly when the verbal text seems to be a simple elucidation of the image. Examining these imagetext relationships as dialectical exchanges reveals the ironic quality of their interconnections, especially when the topic is social class in Harlem. Social class is portrayed throughout the story but most poignantly by two of the many photographs of the street: a calm image of an elegantly dressed woman walking on the sidewalk adjacent to another image on the page facing it of children playing with a fire hydrant in summer (Fig. 2.1). The text below the first image functions like a caption: “Well, where she lives they got an elevator. Pretty streets, clean, it’s on the hill” (DeCarava and Hughes 18). The irony in the dialogue between the text and the photographic image on this verso (left-hand) page is found in its juxtaposition to a larger photograph on the opposite recto (right-hand) page that depicts
children playing around a fire hydrant along with its verbal text. Two features in the pairing of photograph and text on the recto page confirm that the relationship of the image of the elegant woman to its adjoining text on the verso page is ironic. The first feature that generates irony is the difference of camera angles used for these images. The image of the lone woman on the street is seen from a high point of view, a position that suggests distance and control. In contrast, the image of the children playing on the street is taken more or less at their same level, suggesting sympathy and involvement. This contrast sheds doubt about the sincerity of Mary’s positive comments about the image of the lone woman walking.

The second feature involves the size and placement of the photographic images on these two pages. The image of the children playing is much larger and bleeds onto its opposite page, whereas the smaller photograph of the lone woman is found located at the top of the page. This placement of the smaller image also situates it between the two blocks of text below it and to its right, such that both verbal texts interact with it directly. The difference in size of the larger image of the children playing and the fact that it impinges on the adjacent page clearly signals a preference for the livelier, communal scene. This preference is seen, in turn, to reflect once more on the verbal comments about the middle class below the smaller image. The vibrant summer scene of children playing with a fire hydrant is associated with the narrator’s favorite grandson, Rodney, making this street image more desirable than that of her middle-class granddaughter-in-law and, consequently, conferring an ironic tone to her comments about the advantages of the middle-class lifestyle, noted in the caption-like commentary below her photograph. In the paragraph of verbal text to the right of the photograph of the lone woman, Mary compares her middle-class grandchild to her wayward grandson, Rodney, and connects playing with fire hydrants to Rodney to underscore her affinity for him. Irony often appears in Mary’s narrative as
a result of paying attention to crisscross exchanges between photographic images and texts, and contradictions between images and texts reveal the ironic undertones of Mary’s monologue.

Although *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* gives the reader/viewer an overall sense of Harlem that defies usual, negative depictions, it is neither a one-sided nor sugar-coated view: contradictions between images and texts make visible the ambiguities experienced when attitudes toward integration are considered; contradictory and uncertain feelings about integration underscore Mary’s narrative: diverse responses to this issue emerge when attending closely to the dynamic between Mary’s verbal text and two photographic images of women coming home on public transportation at the end of the workday (Fig. 2.2). Juxtaposed with a text that seems to contradict it, the first photograph is of a woman seen from the back who has perhaps just arrived at the station and is awaiting a train or is just resting or even waiting for someone. The uncertainty about the content and significance of this image comes from the perplexing dark hues that blur the scene. Mary’s text suggests that the woman depicted might be her or someone like her—an African American woman coming home to Harlem alone at night after work. Both the image and text comment indirectly on racial and ethnic diversity. Mary speaks about diversity in the New York City subway system and laughs at the need for a Supreme Court decision to integrate schools. In an unexpected association, the diversity she uses to describe the subway in the verbal text is poignantly contradicted by its adjacent photograph: despite the racial diversity in rush hour subway cars, the lone African American woman in the subway station in the photograph can be seen to serve as evidence of a segregated Harlem community.

This same photograph is paired with another image of similar size on an adjacent page, the image of a woman who—we are told by Mary—is resting and waiting for the bus after a long
day at work. Mary’s text notes that the woman is all dressed up, yet there is no way to confirm this statement by looking at the dark and blurry photograph. But this statement points uncannily across the page to the first image of the woman in the subway station, who is more visibly dressed up. Again, in crisscross fashion, the verbal text of the first imagetext underlines the absurdity of the need for a Supreme Court decision to integrate schools because diversity is the norm. A stark representation of segregation is revealed on the opposite page, where the lone, tired woman is waiting on an empty Harlem subway platform. Despite the irony of a segregated African American community in a city in which the public transportation system is integrated, the photographs of working women coming home to Harlem on the subway and the verbal texts describing a hard day at work evoke a sense of their community as a safe and joyous space for its inhabitants, a place to rest and take a break from having to deal with white racism. Hughes’s verbal text—Mary’s monologue—exists in a dialectical relationship to DeCarava’s photographic images, complementing them to point to contradiction or contradicting them to point to complementarity. The interweaving of images and texts in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* elicits provocative and unexpected insights, and the interruptive quality of its visual and verbal intertwining further enhances the story’s multilayered unfolding.

The inherent interruptions of narrative flow prompt the reader/viewer as co-creator to generate new readings of the story. Such readings are, in critic Mary Ann Caws’s terms, the result of “the mutual interference of two objects, a visual and a verbal one, [and] involves a dialogue …” (*The Art of Interference* 4). Caws defines interruptive interferences as positive gestures that both open up the work and defy standard categorizations (6). The abundance of photographic images of diverse sizes and arrangements on the page as well as the equally varied blocks of verbal text in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* urge the reader/viewer to dwell on the beauty
of the photographs and to ponder the intricate implications of the combinations of the verbal and the visual. Hughes’s texts loosely anchor the photographic images while at the same time his words let the photographs speak for themselves. He accomplishes this dynamic by using an uncanny device: he points the written text to the photograph and ends his last sentences with a colon to introduce the image and give it a voice. Echoing his narrator’s relationship to the photographic images, this graphic strategy interrupts the flow of the story to generate a relationship of image to text and allow the image to speak for itself. The interruptive tension generated by the uncommon juxtapositions of this fictional family/community narrative and actual photographs of the Harlem community is especially palpable in the narrative transitions from family to community and from community to family.

A transition that shifts the narrative from the Harlem community to Mary’s family shows the way in which what appears as contradiction between the photographic images on two opposing pages works to confirm Mary’s complicated stance on family and social class. The shift from community to family occurs most immediately by contrasting the photographic images on two facing pages (Fig. 2.3). The verso page contains two small photographs of an elderly couple, identified by Mary as her neighbors. On the opposite, recto, page is a much larger photographic portrait of Mary’s youngest daughter with her child. This Madonna-like image exudes the kind of warmth and emotion valued by Mary, the loving she finds in what she calls being “tangled up in life” and is radically different from the images of the elderly couple in their neat interiors. This visual collision shows the sharp difference between the sterile neatness of the elderly couple’s apartment and the loving openness of the mother and infant, a close-up image in which the background is blurred.
However, when the texts are read in conjunction with the three images, a more ambiguous interpretation emerges. Although the texts adjacent to the two images of the elderly couple confirm the impressions gleaned from only contrasting the photographs, the colons that end the sentences and introduce the same photographs indicate subtle ambiguity, perhaps the desirability of a more ordered and monetarily successful life, or even a sense of pride about the existence of well-off couples in Harlem. The text above the portrait of Mary’s daughter and her child also complicates the meanings of the imagetext: on the one hand, it identifies the people in the portrait, and, on the other hand, it intimates that Mary’s temporary sojourn in her daughter’s family is creating tension. The contradiction between the two ways of life signals a shift in this narrative from community to family and introduces the reader/viewer to a long segment about the sweetness of life experienced by Mary within her daughter’s large family, sweet despite the poverty of the family made visible in the photographic images and texts that portray a joyous yet complicated, or ‘tangled,’ life.

In a second narrative shift, this time from family to community, the reader/viewer is a witness to joy, humiliation, and sweet sorrow in a passage in which sounds—melodious, strident, and placid—orient the juxtapositions of three images and texts (Fig. 2.4). The first image—a large close-up portrait of one of Mary’s daughters laughing heartily—ends a sequence about Mary’s successful family members. The reader/viewer is told that the daughter who is laughing takes lightly the fact that she has been wronged by her mother-in-law, who is pictured as the small female figure walking in an urban landscape. This second image marks the actual transition point between family and community: it highlights aspects of the community while an adjoining verbal text connects her to the family. In contrast to the brightly lit image of the mother-in-law, whose face is invisible, the third photograph is a small portrait of the female
bassist Edna Smith that evokes this musician’s inner feelings and concentration. The imaged text identifies the bassist as a musician without naming her and begins the next sequence, Mary’s description of Harlem’s artists and professionals. A closer look at the second image—the mother-in-law—sandwiched between two very different images, demonstrates how the fictional narrative takes root in the strong contrasts that work together to both exploit and blur traces of the matter-of-factness of photographs such as the one of the mother-in-law.

These transitional moments mark distinctions between family and community, but they are provisional for the narrator, who, from the start, makes it known that the dilemmas of the community are acutely present in her family. She is generally less sympathetic to those members of her family or community who cannot laugh in the face of hardship, and her daughter’s disliked mother-in-law is one such person whose image, in this instance, serves to make the transition from family to community. The photograph is introduced by a verbal statement ending in a colon, which gives the reader/viewer time and reason to wonder why this woman is not liked. In the photograph, the well-dressed woman, whose face is hidden by a big black umbrella or parasol, walks toward large twin advertisements for frames and pictures on Fulton Street that stand in strange contrast to a barren urban landscape strewn with trash and filled with laundry hanging from lines in between buildings.

The collision of elements that are internal to this photograph convey Mary’s feelings about the absurdity of such pretensions; living in Harlem, after all, involves familiarity with poverty and wealth. This same photograph is juxtaposed to another, longer text underneath it. The first part of this text confirms that there is a family conflict with the mother-in-law and encourages the reader/viewer to look back at the photograph for a more in-depth appreciation of its framing. This new reading yields a surprising link between the billboard advertisements and
the woman walking in front of them. Behind the mother-in-law are two very large signs that publicize a shop for pictures and frames located on Fulton Street, far away and in a different and more affluent part of the city. The mother-in-law echoes them with her very white shoes, grey and white dress, and black parasol, her attire suggesting perhaps that she is wealthy enough to have expensively framed photographs on her mantelpiece. The verbal text that blames the uppity mother-in-law ends with the following sly statement that serves to introduce the photograph of a female musician below: “… we got some fine people in our race” (DeCarava and Hughes 34). This third photograph introduces the reader/viewer to a sequence of photographs of Harlem artists and professionals, all depicted in somber tonalities. The bassist’s beautiful face and hand are delicately lit in ambient light, her eyes intensely focused on her playing and her hand actively fingering and holding the bass. The image captures the reader/viewer’s attention by its tonal beauty and emphasizes the narrator’s pride in the artistic achievements of her community in stark contrast to the bright photograph of the mother-in-law that implies criticism of commercialism and middle-class pretensions.

BARTHÉLME’S PROVOCATIVE IMAGETEXTS: “THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE” AND “AT THE TOLSTOY MUSEUM”

Transplanting pictures from one context to another defines the construction of the visual collages of another short story writer, Donald Barthelme. Despite the fact that his visual images are not often actual photographs, the visual materials he uses to create his visual and verbal collage short stories consists of photographically reproduced images and typographic elements of various kinds. The visual collages are created by taking these already decontextualized images, cutting them into fragments, and reassembling the disparate materials into new visual
arrangements. Barthelme’s verbal collages are inspired by the possibilities he discovers making visual collages. Writing about the effects of verbal collages in his essay “Not-Knowing,” he states, “… the combinatorial agility of words, the exponential generation of meaning once they’re allowed to go to bed together, allows the writer to surprise himself, makes art possible, reveals how much of Being we haven’t encountered yet” (21). The re-contextualization of the materials Barthelme uses for his visual and verbal collages produces a different practice of the imagetext than that found in Hughes and DeCarava’s story. Although both Hughes and Barthelme write imagetext short stories inspired by visual materials, Barthelme’s stories seem more acutely experimental: instead of playing with a mixed-media interweaving of linear and circular time, they reject and problematize linear and verisimilar narratives; instead of creating art from the poetry of the vernacular, they combine visual and verbal elements that quote directly from vernacular objects, often called dreck; finally, instead of dwelling on beauty in language, image, and gesture, the shock value of Barthelme’s stories rests joyfully on jarring, difficult, and surprising juxtapositions. However, by taking visual and typographical elements and placing them in the context of his short stories arranged as collages, Barthelme re-contextualizes these visual materials in his stories in order to incite a meditation on external reality; as he, himself, says, “… the aim of meditating about the world is finally to change the world” (24).

Critics situate Barthelme’s work on the cusp of postmodernism and underline the nonrepresentational aspects of his stories where an agglomeration of disparate visual and verbal figures are made to coexist on the same plane and where traditional discourses are parodied.24 Like The Sweet Flypaper of Life, Barthelme’s words and visual images coexist in equality, enter

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24 For recent studies on Barthelme’s postmodernism, see Mary Robertson’s “Postmodern Realism: Discourse as Antihero in Donald Barthelme’s Brain Damage” and Philip Nel’s The Avant-garde and American Postmodernism: Small Incisive Shocks.
into complementary and contradictory relationships as a result of their various juxtapositions, interrupt each other, and end up as successful short stories. Unlike *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, however, the dynamics of words and images on the pages of Barthelme’s collage narratives do not contain hidden meanings: all is on the surface as embodied by the very nature of the collage, a construction that holds all elements in a tension that defies perspective and historical chronology. Barthelme is known to publish the same short story with and without visual images; one such story, “The Educational Experience,” defamiliarizes habitual reading experiences by its heightening of enigmatic associations.

A brief consideration of one of Barthelme’s stories that was published with and without visual collages, “The Educational Experience,” helps to identify how the imagetext version of his short story stages its enigmatic effects differently and more strikingly than it does when not accompanied by pictures. This story, constructed with visual and verbal collages and published in *Harper’s Magazine* in 1973, demonstrates Barthelme’s innovative compositional strategies. On the four pages of *Harper’s* version of the story, Barthelme gives equal weight to his visual collages: the visual collages either crosscut the pages diagonally or are positioned on the right or left margins of the page whereas the text, broken up into segments of one or two paragraphs, appears as blocks of type, each block of image and text takes up roughly the same amount of space on the page. The content and the organization of the words and sentences of the verbal text mirror the seemingly chaotic and random assemblages of objects in the visual collages. Together they intensify what is already enigmatically composed in order to exemplify the absurd rigidity of the traditional and institutional organization of knowledge while

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25 This discussion is based on the story as first published in *Harper’s Magazine* in June 1973. It was subsequently published by Barthelme without pictures in two volumes of his collected stories.
simultaneously presenting the infinite possibilities that emerge from making connections that are free of convention.

Although Barthelme also constructs his non-illustrated short stories as verbal collages that eschew linear plot development, the imagetext version of “The Educational Experience” demonstrates more powerfully how the interruptive quality of visual and verbal collages makes a straightforward linear reading of the narrative impossible. His visual images spatialize the story, slow down the reading process, and both reflect and refract the blocks of adjacent verbal collages. The dialectical exchange between visual and verbal collages in the hybrid version of “The Educational Experience” is manifest in its relationships of complementarity and contradiction. Since Barthelme considers the success of art to be its ability to capture the attention of the viewer, his stories must, like art, ‘seize’ the reader/viewer. Barthelme notes, “Seizure, as it were, is always prior to understanding” and, it should be added, to summoning up the reader/viewer’s critical imagination (“Being Bad” 186).

In his essay, “Donald Barthelme and the End of the End,” critic Thomas Leitch finds the provocative and defamiliarizing qualities of Barthelme’s stories in the juxtaposition of “outrageous premises” and “deadpan presentation” (88) as well as in the combination of “…materials calling for different responses which are undercut by the process of juxtaposition” (89). The paradoxical quality of Barthelme’s stories, their strange but never too strange premises, jolts the reader/viewer but at the same time intrigues him or her because of the natural impulse to try to make sense of the puzzling associations.

The collage-as-art form allows Barthelme to defeat linear plot development, resulting in the expansion of the stories as the radial development of situations, however arbitrary, with no set beginnings or endings. The difficulty of untangling the elements and making sense of their
juxtapositions causes the reader/viewer to be shunted from image to text without relief. When one occasionally finds a caption under an image or a seemingly explanatory text, its content quickly appears as a false impression of the subject at hand. However, from the juxtaposition of verbal and visual collages, there is hope that something that did not exist beforehand is being created by each reading/viewing. As Barthelme, himself, says, “… the point of collage is that unlike things are stuck together to make, in the best case, a new reality. This new reality, in the best case, may be or imply a comment on another reality from which it came, and may be also much else” (qtd. in Warde 56).

The juxtapositions of visual and verbal re-contextualized materials in the story “At the Tolstoy Museum” give concrete form to Barthelme’s comment on the potential of collage, beginning with the story’s perplexing setting. By situating his story about the high modernist writer Tolstoy in a museum—which, like this short story, involves juxtapositions of visual and verbal material—Barthelme satirizes modern literature in a way that puzzles because it is both absurd and true at the same time. The commonplace factuality of the museum collides with the outrageously constructed museum, tempting the reader/viewer to see practices that commodify the personality of the author as elements of a critique of the role of the museum. The enigmatic effects present in “At the Tolstoy Museum” are caused by Barthelme’s combinations of factual and fictional materials. The analysis of the juxtaposition of two images with captions and the narrator’s summary of a story by Tolstoy begins this exploration of Barthelme’s ingenious employment of the ambiguous and the enigmatic (Fig. 2.6).

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26 This analysis is based on the story as published in Barthelme’s 1970 short story collection, City Life. Its first publication was in The New Yorker, May 24, 1969; it was also published in Barthelme’s collection entitled Forty Stories in 1987. All versions include pictures, albeit in varying configurations with texts.

27 See Douglas Crimp’s “On the Museum’s Ruins” for a consideration of how, for example, the use of photography in Rauschenberg’s work serves to challenge the coherence of museum discourse.
What seems at first glance to connect the two visual images and the summary of Tolstoy’s story is the rural setting of all three, a setting that alludes realistically to Tolstoy’s admiration for the values of agricultural societies. But a sense of uncertainty sets in that immediately undercuts the references to Tolstoy’s affiliations with the rural. The most visible detail that calls into question and ridicules these harmonious biographical and literary connections is Tolstoy’s manipulated inclusion in a photograph on the verso page where, among six other hunters, he is shown in an image with a caption that says, “Tiger Hunt, Siberia.” It is strikingly obvious that a miniature copy of the very large portrait of Tolstoy’s face—seen on the very first page of the story—has been cut out and pasted onto the body of a hunter that sits directly behind the tiger and holds a hunting rifle. The tricky and humorous effect of this cut-and-paste manipulation casts the first shadow on the supposedly seamless and informational nature of the objects in this verbal–visual collage.

More puzzlement arises from a closer look at the second image of a younger Tolstoy, placed above the image of the tiger hunt; it startles viewers by its ambiguous relationship to its caption, “At Starogladkovskaya, about 1852.” On the one hand, the caption establishes the connection to Tolstoy by alluding to the fact that he ran away to Starogladkovskaya because of gambling debts in 1851. It also reiterates Tolstoy’s dedication to and admiration for the rural by serving to identify Starogladkovskaya as the Cossack town that inspired his novel *The Cossacks*, a masterpiece about primitive rural life. On the other hand, the young, smartly dressed man in this picture is holding a unicycle, an invention of the 1880s. This mechanical object—more commonly an urban artifact in the nineteenth century—dominates the picture frame and makes its rural setting unremarkable by foregrounding and highlighting the man with the unicycle. The juxtaposition of elements depicting Tolstoy and his alleged rural involvements continues this
story’s undermining of how the museum foregrounds and displays historical information in an often-futile attempt to explain the art object.

The third item on these two pages—the narrator’s summary of Tolstoy’s 1886 story “Three Hermits” with a commentary—adds to the enigmatic nature of these pictures and texts by mimicking what appears on the walls of museums. Instead of displaying Tolstoy’s story on the wall/page, a summary turns the narrator temporarily and humorously into a curator/commentator. Furthermore, the separate commentary below the summary acts like a caption that reframes it, adding statements that are informational, often irrelevant, unimportant, false, personal, and mockingly critical, thus pointing to the museum’s pretentious and rigidly conventional role as an informational institution. Nevertheless, the provocations that emerge from the verbal and visual collages on these two pages of “At The Tolstoy Museum” simultaneously and positively suggest that renewed and critical readings of Tolstoy (and modern literature) and of the function of the museum are imperative. Furthermore, by mischievously embodying the fictional coherence that traditionally groups objects in a museum, this story offers new ideas about how museum exhibitions might be organized.

Framed by portraits of Tolstoy with and without captions, this short story seems to simply depict a tour of the museum, but the portraits on the first and last page overwhelm and confuse the reader/viewer by the surprising impact of their scale and positioning. A large engraved black-and-white portrait of Tolstoy’s face is dominantly placed in the middle of the first page of the story, directly after the title page. Since there is no caption to identify the image, the viewer must assume that the figure is the Tolstoy of the story’s title. The portrait is intimidating, due both to its size and the positioning of its figure’s eyes, which stare directly at the viewer. This same facial portrait in negative and much smaller in size appears on the last
page of the story, floating eerily at the horizon point of a Renaissance perspectival study of columns. The caption of this negative image places the viewer/reader outside the museum, looking at the museum plaza: “Museum plaza with monumental head (Closed Mondays)” (Barthelme, “At the Tolstoy Museum” [City Life] 50). However, it is a plaza depicted without a museum in sight; what stands in place of the museum is the “monumental head” as stated in the caption. Together, these portraits and the absurd scheduling information in parentheses suggest that the containment and presentation of knowledge in a staid and conventional manner fails and produces instead an insubstantial floating ghostly figure that, having escaped containment and broken the frame, comes back to haunt the institutional.

The strength of Barthelme’s short stories rests on his ability to construct visual and verbal collages with just the right amount of tension between the ordinary and the outrageous. The ordinary refers to the variety of actual references he draws from numerous sources whereas the outrageous involves how these visual and verbal elements are combined, their juxtapositions, and the creative manipulations of their often-falsified and/or unattributed nature. The re-contextualization of the photographs plays on complementary, contradictory, and often ironic interweaving of images and texts that constitute the short story, generating responses well beyond its frame.

URBAN CONFIGURATIONS

The ambiguities created by these innovative imagetext short stories point inescapably to the question of the relationship of the work to the world at large. The use of visual materials and the inclusion of vernacular and commercial forms of language in the written texts call for a
discussion about how imagetext stories such as *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* and Barthelme’s stories “The Photographs” and “A Nation of Wheels” relate to and reconfigure the phenomenal urban reality of their source material. Concepts from photographic theory orient this discussion by scrutinizing the construction of these stories to discover how they challenge conventional representational norms. Thinking about what a photograph represents directs immediate attention to the relationship between the photograph itself and its subject, commonly called the referent or the index. At stake in this relationship is the truth or evidentiary value of the photograph. How do short stories that combine texts with photographic and photographically produced images of popular cultural materials work with common assumptions about the nature of the photograph to reflectively and critically engage the reader/viewer? These writers and the photographer DeCarava play on the intermingling of the factual and the fictional by emphasizing either depth or flatness in their imagetexts in order to confound and stimulate the critical capacities of the reader/viewer.

How does the written text of these short stories work with the images in juxtaposition to accentuate depth and perspective in order to stress the documentary dimensions of the story or, conversely, to foreground flatness in order to highlight the visual and verbal narrative’s fictionality? *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* and Barthelme’s imagetext short stories are fictional constructions made using both factual and fictional materials. This section interrogates what happens in the imagetext story when the reader’s/viewer’s common beliefs about the truth value of manufactured photographs or pictures are taken into account and when, conversely, the verbal narrative or the story itself is manifestly fictional. By playing with the illusion of reality generated by the use of photographs and photographically reproduced materials, the intertwining of the documentary and fictional dimensions of these text and image juxtapositions challenges
the visual and textual habits of the reader/viewer and thus intensifies the effects of the stories’ already elliptical qualities. Understanding the complicated relationship of the fictional and the factual in a photograph—as discussed in photographic theory—helps when thinking about the complex interweaving of fact and fiction in their construction.

In photographic theory, the question of the relationship of the photograph to phenomenal reality involves thinking about the camera as an instrument designed to render images in perspective and about the viewer’s relationship to what is framed in the image. The relationship of the photograph to the real invokes the much-debated question of the index or the referent and, consequently, the truth value of the photographic image.\(^{28}\) If, as Barthes suggests in *La chambre claire*, the referent is always part of the photograph,\(^ {29}\) then the index—or the trace of the photograph’s subject—unavoidably conditions how photographs are looked at. The use of photographic images or photographic reproductions of popular and commercial cultural materials in Hughes and DeCarava’s and Barthelme’s imagetext short stories invariably conjures up accepted beliefs about the truth value of the photographic. Historian of photography Geoffrey Batchen notes that the photograph is also a patently manipulated object: “In the mere act of transcribing world into picture, three dimensions into two, photographers necessarily manufacture the images they make” (212). To work against the camera—built to create images that give the illusion of depth through perspective—results in a stress on flatness, a quality that draws attention to the constructedness of the image. Although it is common to think of the photograph as being either a document or a work of art, this binary conception is challenged by

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\(^{28}\) The importance of the index underlies art historian Rosalind Krauss’s writing on photography. See, for example, her “Notes on the Obtuse.” In a symposium on photography, she underlines the continued importance of Barthes’s writings on photography. She writes, “Barthes’s work on photography cannot be ignored...it remains magisterial and devoted to the index, to the nothing to say.” (342).

\(^{29}\) About the inevitability of the photographic referent, Barthes says: “… the photograph always carries its referent within itself …” (*Camera Lucida* 5).
contemporary photographic theorists such as Batchen and Michel Poivert, for whom the photograph is both truth and fiction (Poivert 516).

In this section, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* is discussed in terms of how it departs from the photo essay, which, along with the photobook or the travel book, was the usual and popular form for the joint publication of photographs and verbal text at the time of its publication. Its differences with its journalistic sister form point to the way in which its exemplary imagetext juxtapositions resonate with and announce postmodern approaches on similar themes. Following the exploration of Hughes and DeCarava’s short story, two of Barthelme’s stories that are more invested in the photographic, “The Photographs” and “A Nation of Wheels,” are discussed in terms of Barthelme’s use of visual and verbal collages, on the effects of their juxtapositions, and on the way these imagetext short stories mobilize familiar cultural and photographic elements to defy conventional ways of making meaning.

**THE SWEET FLYPAPER OF LIFE: TRANSFIGURATIONS OF THE URBAN EVERYDAY**

In *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, photographic images in conversation with the verbal text engage the reader-viewer in a critical appreciation of the politics of representation by simultaneously exploiting photography’s fictional and attestative dimensions. This photographically illustrated fictional work is unlike the more popular journalistic photo texts of the 1950s: Hughes and DeCarava’s short story uses photographic images in defiance of a positivist conception of the photograph by exploiting the paradox of photography, that is, by playing on both its connection to the real and its constructed fictional qualities. As members of the community that is the source of their fictional narrative, Hughes and DeCarava self-consciously infuse the concrete materials of their fictional representation—photographs and
verbal folk expressions—with their imaginative conceptualizations in order to compose a multilayered, compact story. Critics who write about image and word, such as Jefferson Hunter, and who adhere to the binary definition of the photograph are much less convinced about the successful correspondence between fiction and photography in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*. In his book on the interactions between words and photographic images in the twentieth century, Hunter considers *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* a flawed work because of what he sees as the impossible connections between its fictional narrative and the photographs of Harlem (Hunter 20). Although discussing this work primarily in the context of the American photo essay might simplify and reduce it to what it is not, it must be acknowledged that *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* draws from the tradition of the photo essay, albeit to produce a different kind of work.

Photo essays, published sometimes as books but more commonly as magazine and newspaper reports, popularly combined photographic images and the written word in America from the 1930s to the 1960s. These publications tend to combine verbal texts with visual evidence to document injustices and pursue social reform. Two such publications focusing on African Americans and/or on Harlem and involving African American authors appeared prior to *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*. As a photo text, Aaron Siskind’s *Harlem Document* was produced between 1932 and 1940, and, although not published until 1981, its intent was to invite active viewing and reading much like Hughes and DeCarava’s publication. Although the photographs were taken by Siskin, the originator of the project was an African American sociologist, Michael Carter, and the texts that accompany the images are made up of diverse materials that include

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30 For Jefferson Hunter, the weakness of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* is that it opposes “… the prevailing view of photography, the view best publicized, most generously funded, and most often translated into the images of photo texts—namely, that photography supplies evidence” (39). In this analysis, what Hunter sees as a weakness is considered a strength. Furthermore, Hunter’s statement about the dominance of the journalistic photo text in the 1950s and beyond aptly describes what Hughes and DeCarava set out to critique.
interviews, vernacular songs and rhymes, and reminiscences of local residents that were collected by African Americans from the Harlem community. Like The Sweet Flypaper of Life, its written texts bear at most an indirect relationship to the adjoining photographs, and the connections between images and texts are left open for interpretation. Another, more conventional, photo essay, 12 Million Black Voices, was published originally as a book by black novelist Richard Wright in 1941. It combines photographs taken from the Farm Security Administration archives and a sociological-historical text that denounces the historical injustices suffered by African Americans. The verbal text by Wright straightforwardly explains the social and economic causes of poverty and oppression and works to control the photographs’ meaning. It is constructed like a classic photo essay, with an unusual and openly anti-capitalist political commentary. The work of photojournalist Gordon Parks from the 1940s to the 1960s continued the tradition of the documentary photo essay: he wrote the texts and took the photographs that comprise his powerful reports on African American communities that were published in mainstream periodicals such as Life magazine.

Like these journalistic works, Hughes and DeCarava’s short story combines photographic images and words, uses a similar layout of images and text on the page, and exists in the same historical context in which photographs are conceived by most as either documents or works of art. This story differs, however, in the way in which it combines and plays on both the artistic and documentary aspects of the photograph, in its deployment of literary devices such as character development and narrative progression, and in a cultivation of the enigmatic made possible by its independence from the visual and verbal strictures of journalistic conventions. One more striking difference from the conventional photo essay is the fact that the story is told in

a black female voice, a strategy that critic Maren Stange suggests in her 1996 essay on DeCarava’s photographs is itself already a subversion of the mostly white and male-dominated photo essay form (12). In order to appreciate how this hybrid work coheres to create an innovative work of short fiction, it is necessary to consider the intermingling of the fictional and the factual, both in the photograph and in its relation to the verbal text. The paradoxical nature of situations depicted in DeCarava’s photographs is made visible by how the photographer manipulates perspective in a variety of ways; the verbal depiction of character and community in Hughes’s story makes possible the concentration of a multiplicity of points of view in one vernacular and poetic voice.

Told using actual photographs taken in Harlem, New York, and written in the vernacular of this same community with ample references to its culture, this fictional depiction of an actual community achieves its powerful and innovative effects as a short story by interweaving the factual and the fictional using artistic devices such as its linear and circular structure and the development of a main character, the narrator Sister Mary, as well as a full depiction of her favorite grandson. Despite its obvious fictional character and given its historical context in which texts with photographs are most often photo essays, this story, especially the form of its publication, might at first identify it as another photographic documentary about Harlem. To underline the multivalent imagery of this work, this analysis begins by examining several characteristics of the narrative that clearly differentiate it from journalistic photo essays. A comparison of two photographs and texts about boys reading, one from this story and one from a photo essay of a Harlem family by Gordon Parks, highlights the qualities that are unique to the fictional imagetext. Secondly, I was inspired by certain affinities noticed with photographer Carrie Mae Weems’s 2014 photographic exhibition while contemplating her “The Kitchen Table
Series”\(^{32}\)—most notably the ways in which both works ground the political in the personal—and discovered more readings than at first seemed possible when looking at the imagetext of Mary’s daughter Melinda, which is the last image in a lengthy sequence of images about family dynamics that are located in the kitchen. The intertwining of the personal and the political in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* and in Weems’s “Kitchen Table Series” illustrates the capacity of the artistic and fictional to present family scenes—more particularly here, African American family scenes—with deeper resonance and complexity than is possible in journalistic accounts.

To appreciate the artistic power of the combinations of photographic image and text in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, it is useful to imagine one of its pages in brief comparison to a page from Park’s photo essay about a Harlem family, the Fontenelle family, which was published in *Life* magazine in 1968.\(^{33}\) Although similar to the journalistic essay in use and layout of photographic images, as well as in theme and subject matter, Hughes and DeCarava’s short story imagetext portrays an imagined community using photographs but does not, as noted earlier, have to conform to journalistic conventions that depend strictly on the veracity of the photographic image. When Parks calls his camera a “weapon” in the fight against poverty, discrimination, and prejudice, he is referring to the evidentiary power of his images.\(^{34}\) Historian of photography Deborah Willis confirms this stance when she says that Parks shows things as they are (89). Parks’s documentary and *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* differ in their presentations of daily life in Harlem, despite the fact that the profound resilience of the African American

\(^{32}\) The retrospective exhibition of Weems’s work I visited was held at the Guggenheim Museum in NYC from January 24 to May 13, 2014. For the images and texts from Weems’s “The Kitchen Series” see Weems, Carrie Mae *Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*: 76-105.

\(^{33}\) This photo essay was consulted as it appears reproduced in Gordon Parks’s book titled *Gordon Parks: A Harlem Family* 1967.

\(^{34}\) Referring to a statement from his book *A Choice of Weapons* in his memoir, Gordon Parks restates that his camera is a more powerful tool than a gun (*A Hungry Heart* 302).
community is the common ground of both works. Parks and DeCarava are master photographers known to create images that represent their political and aesthetic views: Parks deploys the aesthetic to make his political statements; DeCarava sees politically to make an aesthetic statement.

Both Gordon Parks and Roy DeCarava tend to favor photographic images that are flat or, in other terms, that have little or no perspective. Although flatness in a photograph usually highlights its artistic qualities, Parks flattens his images to dramatically emphasize their realism while DeCarava uses flatness to make his images less realistic and more artistically expressive. Simultaneously, Parks’s text intensifies the realism of his images whereas the verbal text of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* is more puzzling and piercing than informative. Considering that the camera lens is designed to produce images in perspective, it is expected that greater realistic effects will be achieved by rendering perspective in the photographic image. Hence, to create a more artistic and less realistic image, the photographer might construct a flat image instead, figuring out how to work against the camera’s built-in depth of field. However, in his analysis of Walker Evans’s work, photography theorist Éric de Chassey has argued that the flat photographic image can actually and paradoxically be more realistic. This is possible when flatness calls attention to the construction of the image and challenges its supposed transparency without negating its relation to the real (de Chassey 207). Two photographs of boys reading and studying illustrate the different effects of the flat image (Fig. 2.7). This comparison of photographic images also involves the texts on the pages that contain them. In contrast to the journalistic essay, the vivid and multilayered depiction of family and/or community in the short story is effective and inspirational because, as a work of fiction, it freely and creatively juxtaposes photographic images and texts that simultaneously tell a story and arrest its
chronological thrust, creating fissures that provoke an infinite number of possible associations and meanings.

Parks’s flat image of a boy doing his homework in bed contains a hint of depth that suggests that his bed is not in a bedroom but is perhaps somewhere in an apartment hallway. The fact that he is fully dressed and in bed suggests that there is no heat in the apartment and illustrates more specifically the message in its caption: “With a coat on and a blanket, Kenneth’s fingers are still stiff” (Parks, *A Harlem Family* 101). Furthermore, by pointing to the effects of poverty on the education of children, this image echoes the central theme of the two pages inscribed in the photograph’s framing and in the hope and despair of Parks’s heading: “If just one of these kids can make it in some way, I’ll be thankful” (100). The boy is seen from the foot of the bed, in between its footboard and headboard. This bed frame, blurry in the foreground and in focus in the background, conveys his entrapment in poverty. The flatness of this image, like many of Walker Evans’s photographs, serves to dramatically reveal to the viewer the unjust existence of lives lived in extreme poverty. This image, along with its caption, heading, paragraphs of explanatory text, and four other photographs, is intended to inform and denounce; the aesthetic effects of its flatness are aimed at capturing the viewer’s attention, directing it to the political cause at hand, and selling the magazine. Despite the fact that the verbal message can never fully control the reception of an image, Parks’s photo essay forcefully unifies all of its elements to denounce racism and poverty. DeCarava’s image of a boy reading seems, at first glance, a direct and unambiguous message, much like Parks’s imagetexts. However, close attention to the relationship between DeCarava’s image of a boy reading, a second DeCarava image adjacent to it, and the accompanying text point instead to its contradictoriness.
The image of the boy reading in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* appears toward the end of the story, after the reader/viewer has been introduced to a long display of the professional, social, and political activities of Harlemites and before Mary’s monologue returns to family and the conclusion of her story. Its placement on top of the page and juxtaposition to another image establishes a contrast between day and night: the daylight scene of a boy reading is placed above an image of young Rodney in a windowless, dark basement room—perhaps at night—hands in pockets (Fig. 2.8). The daylight image, taken almost at eye level, is of a boy seated at a large windowsill, reading what appears to be a magazine. It is a luminous and detailed flat image: the full frame of the photograph is that of a building façade in which the large open window dominates the space of the image. The double framing of this image lures the viewer into the room only to discover that it is not possible to look beyond the boy into the apartment because that inner space is blocked by a lace curtain that is depicted with the precision of photographic description. The text below this photograph echoes the function of the curtain: it places the reader/viewer in an impossible position, at the windowsill looking out, by saying that much can be seen from windows in Harlem. Similarly perplexing is the fact that the boy in the window is reading and therefore not looking out. It is when the reader/viewer’s attention is piqued by the incongruities between the image and the verbal narrative that Mary’s political point is made. She alludes to social class when she says that there are better and worse windows from which to look out, and this verbal comment serves to point back to the class disparities signaled by the fancy curtain behind the boy in the photograph.

On the adjacent page, a dark photograph of Rodney is taken from a higher angle to perhaps signify an underground existence and to reaffirm the reader/viewer’s prior knowledge about his preference for nightlife. He looks toward the low light that illuminates him and stands
with hands in his pants pockets in a gesture that echoes earlier photographs. The photograph’s darkness obscures the room and thus adds to the flatness and the impenetrability of the image. In the background of this photograph, a framed picture is hung. The blurred picture mirrors the mysteriousness of the photograph such that this photograph and the bright one above it both evoke the unknowable, albeit differently. Mary’s verbal commentary above the photograph of Rodney adds to the perplexity when it contradicts her earlier statement about the desirability of looking out from front windows; she says, “… not that you necessarily see anymore” (DeCarava and Hughes 85). She then pauses and rethinks her comment on the benefits of basement rooms, only to change her mind and restate her preference for front windows, and this preference reminds her to worry about Rodney. The delicate Rembrandt lighting on his face and the barely perceptible outline of his body accentuates what the reader/viewer has come to imagine about Rodney from the story’s monologue and images, yet at the same time, the low ambient light suggests other readings: is he hiding, hanging out, at a clandestine political meeting, listening to music, etc.? The way he is portrayed makes him the more problematic figure; it is intimated throughout the story that the construction of a black aesthetic hinges on the success of characters like Rodney. In other words, he and Mary embody the artistic achievements of Harlem by the way in which they represent artistic transfigurations of the vernacular culture of the African American experience.

The images and text on these pages mark a break in the narrative, a moment of pause before transitioning from the imagined community to the imagined family. This break affords the reader/viewer the space to reflect on how these contrasting images might also be complementary. On the one hand, the realistic elements of the photographs win the attention of the reader/viewer and invite him or her to wonder about the lives of the depicted boys and men, about their
insertion in the community, and about Mary’s ongoing concerns and ability to protect them. On the other hand, these flat and blurred images as well as Mary’s contradictory statements incite the reader/viewer to raise questions hinted at by the story’s expansive and elliptical qualities; such questions might involve a reflection on the tensions between work and play, the individual and the community, or art and life. The viewer of these two images is easily seduced by the apparently simple and reductive reading of their contrasting qualities: light and darkness, detail and blurriness, a point of view from below looking up, a point of view from above looking down, and a figure immersed in reading in contrast to a barely visible figure who looks somewhere at what is outside the picture frame and seems distracted. Another way that Hughes and DeCarava artistically configure photographic images and text in the service of constructing their short story is manifest in the last imagetext of a long sequence of images and texts that take place in Mary’s daughter Melinda’s kitchen.

Seen through the contemporary lens of photographer Carrie Mae Weems’s 1990 “Kitchen Table Series,” one imagetext from the sequence of photographs and verbal commentaries set in Mary’s daughter’s kitchen illustrates how the deliberate construction of enigmatic effects generated by the tensions between photographic image and text further differentiates The Sweet Flypaper of Life from the documentary photo essay (Fig. 2.9). Writing about Hughes and DeCarava’s story in the context of his essay on Weems, titled “Carrie Mae Weems: Anyway I Want It,” art historian Richard Storr calls it a masterpiece that is relevant, though dated due to the limits of its naturalism (23). For Storr, The Sweet Flypaper of Life is a heroic representation that counters negative racist images by presenting life as it is. Weems’s work, in contrast, is, for Storr, antitheroic because of how its artifice is made explicit in the staged kitchen scenes of her “Kitchen Table Series” and by the fact that the photographer—totally in
control of this staged visual experience—is also the author of the verbal panels and captions that accompany the photographs. The narration that holds together the photographs in The Sweet Flypaper of Life is not convincing for Storr because, in its awkward attempt to give voice to the characters depicted in the photographs, it closes up what could be critical openings between image and text (23-24). Conversely, and according to Storr, Weems’s photographs confront the viewer and neither let him or her take anything at face value nor allow an identification with the image, and it is precisely this ‘unnaturalism’ that opens spaces in the images and texts whose effects make possible critical and aesthetic appreciations of the work (28).

I agree with Storr that the self-conscious stress on the artificiality of the artwork in Weems does not apply to Hughes and DeCarava’s story and that the story shares with the documentary the demand that the reader/viewer see the work as an authentic expression of African American urban culture. However, given the thirty-five-year difference between Weems’s performative art and Hughes and DeCarava’s story, the aesthetic and critical potential of The Sweet Flypaper of Life does not reside in the questioning of the power of art itself but is located instead in the interstices of the imagetext dynamic and in the ambiguities of the images that, in defiance of the verbal text, look back at and make demands of the reader/viewer.35 One imagetext—a photograph with text of Mary’s daughter Melinda reading in the kitchen—illustrates how multiple, diverse meanings emerge from the kind of tension that Weems speaks about in a conversation with bell hooks about the power of photographs: “… there will always be this kind of tension between what you see within a photograph and what you see beneath it, with the text always cutting through” (qtd. in hooks 82-83).

35 A black aesthetic defines the work of DeCarava, Hughes, and Weems. This aesthetic—rooted in the African experience and in African American cultural experience—is discussed by DeCarava in an interview with Ivor Miller: “My feeling is that the black artist looks at the same world in a different way than a Euro-American artist” (Miller 847).
Weems’s feminist depiction of black womanhood in the “Kitchen Table Series” suggests alternative readings of the last imagetext of the sequence of photographs and texts from *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, an image located in the apartment kitchen of the narrator’s daughter Melinda with its adjoining verbal text. Like Weems, who is the protagonist, photographer, and writer of the “Kitchen Table Series,” the narrator of Hughes and DeCarava’s text is black and female; in significantly different ways, as noted before, both are the antithesis of the mid twentieth century white or black male journalistic portrayals of black women. Weems creates depictions that speak truth to power on her own terms, and when she gives voice to herself (She) or to her man (He) or to her mother in the verbal text panels of the “Kitchen Table Series,” there is no reason to doubt her statements nor her role as protagonist and performer in the photographs. In contrast, Mary, the black female narrator, is the character created by Hughes to express contradictory points of view in the black urban community in the 1950s, perspectives embodied in the family and community members said to be represented in DeCarava’s photographs. His photographic images are manufactured to evoke mood, gesture, and tone, and his use of ambient light makes them dark and blurred in ways that deliberately contradict the realism of journalistic photography. The way DeCarava manipulates the photographic image to stress its ambiguity makes possible both its plausible and incongruous relationship to Hughes’s fictional monologue. Hence, the stance of this short story is to vividly present multiple and contradictory points of view by juxtaposing images and text in which disjointedness in punctuating moments such as the one of Mary’s daughter in the kitchen can be seen to interrogate creatively stereotypical ways of thinking and seeing.

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36 In contrast to the more complex depictions of kitchen life in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, two kitchen images from Richard Wright’s journalistic photo text, *12 Million Black Voices*—one of a black mother and her child in her kitchenette facing that of a black maid serving a white child in the kitchen of a white family—are combined to literally denounce black poverty and servitude. 132-133.
The last image of the sequence is a large close-up photograph of Melinda looking down and reading the newspaper, and it is placed above a long paragraph of text that attempts to interpret the image for the reader/viewer (Fig. 2.9). However, the image itself contradicts and makes visible the one-sided and controlling nature of the reading offered by Mary’s monologue. It ends a series of images and adjoining texts in this long kitchen sequence in which dialectical relationships draw attention away from realistic details in the photographs, pointing instead to lively intergenerational dynamics of family and community life. These dynamics are evoked by the gestures and exchanged glances of those depicted in the photographs and in the gaps between the photographs’ depictions and the statements in the verbal texts. The sequence is framed by its first ambiguous imagetext: the narrator refers verbally to the tumult of her sweet but tangled life while the adjoining image is one of a serene Madonna-like image of her daughter holding an infant. This flattened and closely cropped photograph of mother and child stands in logical sequence but also in contrast to the last image of Melinda, sitting alone at the kitchen table reading.

While reading, Melinda is portrayed against a blurry kitchen sink, as if to erase detail in order to confirm the temporal rhythm of the sequence by evoking the end, albeit temporary, of a day of domestic work and child care and the beginning of free time for herself. The photograph is more prominent on the page and seen before the reader has a chance to peruse the verbal paragraph that is situated below the image. Mary’s words tell the reader a story that locks Melinda into the role of dutiful wife. She tells the reader that Melinda is sad because her husband has left and, curiously, gives Melinda the same advice that the mother in Weems’s “Kitchen Table Series” gives as a reason to compromise with your man: he is good and brings his salary home. However, the photograph itself and the mother-narrator’s rebelliousness point to a very
different reading of the same image. Instead of thinking about her as longing for her husband, it is just as possible to think about her enjoying time alone, reading with interest, looking for a job, and, in general, exemplifying the strong, resilient black woman at the center of this story and of Weems’s “Kitchen Table Series.” Both works seek to ground the political in the personal and the everyday in order to implicate the reader/viewer more poignantly, more thoroughly, and more thoughtfully. Weems’s work makes, in retrospect, more visible the displacements of meaning that take place in the spaces between the photographs and the texts in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, displacements that challenge reader/viewer assumptions, inspire new interpretations and/or associations, and incite personal responses that awaken political reactions.

Unlike the journalistic photo essay, Hughes and DeCarava’s fictional narrative is more powerful and enduring due to its inventive deployment of the fictional and factual dimensions of its photographs and to its creative linear and circular narrative that, like the photographs, artistically combines the fictional and the everyday vernacular in the narrator’s monologue. Hughes and DeCarava’s short story is wrought from surprising juxtapositions of images and texts that interweave contradictory and/or complementary statements to construct an incisive, uniquely inventive short story, a hybrid object where image and text retain their specificity.

BARTHELME: “THE PHOTOGRAPHS” AND “A NATION OF WHEELS”

Although he is less likely to use photographs, Barthelme’s stories evoke flatness throughout because they are composed of visual and verbal collages, and the collage is known to flatten three-dimensional objects.37 This stress on the surface is particularly manifest in the short

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37 According to John Berger, “Cubism broke the illusionist three dimensional space of painting” (“The Moment of Cubism” 84). Like cubism, collages and assemblages challenge the illusionism of three-dimensional space. Barthelme was familiar with how painters were using flatness and would probably have visited the 1961 MOMA
stories that consist of verbal and visual collages. The complex interplay of image and text enacts a deliberate confusion between fact and fiction that ramps up the intensity of undecidability in the stories. They tend to disrupt our commonsense relationship to the world at large by his unconventional use of familiar verbal and visual materials, decontextualized and artistically regrouped. Although writer William Gass does not find surrealist features in Barthelme’s stories (noted in Kim Herzinger’s preface to Not-Knowing, vi), they are often thought of as surrealist works in the ordinary sense because they reshuffle common images and known texts in apparently illogical juxtapositions. The reader/viewer is jolted into confronting these clusters of objects made opaque and newly visible in his stories because of the contrast established between their everydayness and their new, unorthodox esthetic configurations. One such visual and verbal story is an uncanny extended meditation on the non-representable and is ironically titled “The Photographs.”  

“The Photographs” is a parody of positivism in scientific discourse that plays on the idea of the photograph as fact or utter truth, on its capacity to objectify and turn everything into a commodity, and on its pliability or context dependency. Starting with its title, the story provocatively mocks scientific pretensions to represent everything as fact, bolstered by the use of the photograph as evidence. Under the title, two images/photographs of what looks like ancient pottery finds from an archeological dig are followed, on the same first page, by captions and an explanatory paragraph claiming that these images are snapshots of the human soul (Fig. 2.10).

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38 The discussion of this story is based on its publication in Bartheleme’s 1974 collection Guilty Pleasures. It was also published in The New Yorker on February 21, 1970.
The fact that the paragraph can be seen as an extended caption makes this first page look like an excerpt from a scientific magazine article or from a newspaper clipping. In a detached tone, it is explained that these accidental images were made inadvertently by sophisticated and slyly humorous-sounding technological means called “spectroscopic plates.” Following this first, very formal page are several more pages of informal dialogue between two scientists who were, on the first page, referred to by their official titles. The shift effected by the juxtaposition of the mock magazine article and the dialogue appears immediately in a radical change of tone: the objectively sounding fake article adjoins a dialogue in colloquial language by the two scientists who, in their lab, are made known to the reader by their nicknames. The change in tone illustrates the contrast between the absurd certainties of the article and the need for uncertainty, which is slowly discovered by the scientists, who end their conversation with the decision to burn the images, a decision that leaves the reader/viewer stimulated but without any points of reference.

Inspired by the physical collages of Max Ernst and the combines of his friend, the artist Robert Rauschenberg, Barthelme produced a number of imagetext short stories like “A Nation of Wheels” using visual and verbal collage techniques. Although most of Barthelme’s stories are verbal collages, for a number of years he published stories using verbal collages and visual collages, the latter a practice he mostly and throughout his life engaged in privately. When asked in an interview why he didn’t write ‘pure’ genres such as tragedy, he stated, “… I’m fated to deal in mixtures, slumgullions, which preclude tragedy, which requires a pure line” (Barthelme, “Interview with John O’Hara” 281). Despite conflicting and apparently nonsensical visual and verbal combinations of factual and fictional materials, the coherence of Barthelme’s imagetext short stories lies in their parodic and ironic power, which, in turn, depends on the fact that he
draws his materials from the world at large and artistically recombines them. As Barthelme himself notes, “… art is always a meditation upon external reality rather than a representation of external reality or a jackleg attempt to ‘be’ external reality” (“Not-Knowing” 23). For him, the stories must be meditations that “short circuit the expected order of things” (“After Joyce” 9) to present unanticipated combinations that work to elicit limitless interpretation. Furthermore, and counterintuitively, he suggests that the “impurity” of his literary work is exactly what gives it the power to evoke verisimilitude (“Interview with John O’Hara” 282). “A Nation of Wheels” is one of Barthelme’s many imagetext short stories that illustrates how his juxtapositions of cultural materials from everyday visual and verbal sources marshal familiar materials into parodic and ironic play.39

Barthelme’s “A Nation of Wheels”—the story of an America dominated by tires that represent technological progress—consists of absurd and humorous juxtapositions of visual and verbal collages that satirically reconfigure the contemporary intertwining of the discourses of technology, advertising, and art.40 The perplexing collisions brought about by the strange and hilarious combinations of familiar materials gives the story its ironic force. It undercuts the reader/viewer’s indexical relationship to the photographic images of tires collaged with other reproduced visual images and mines the tone of scientific, technological, and historical discourses in the verbal collage to frame absurd and contradictory statements. The contrasts within the visual and verbal collages as well as between each other engender confusions that require critical questioning if they are to make any sense at all. Barthelme’s use of

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39 Imagetexts examined from the story “A Nation of Wheels” are from its publication in the 1974 collection Guilty Pleasures. It was also published the same year in The New Yorker with images and texts in different configurations.
40 In his essay “Not-Knowing,” Barthelme writes with irony on the commercialization of culture: “When one adds the ferocious appropriation of high culture by commercial culture—it takes, by my estimate, about forty-five minutes for any given novelty in art to travel from the Mary Boone Gallery on West Broadway to the display windows of Henri Bendel on Fifty-seventh street—one begins to appreciate the seductions of silence” (17).
decontextualized photographic images challenges the viewer’s habitual ways of seeing them as they are ubiquitously present in advertisements; similarly, his verbal text disconcerts the reader/viewer by deploying a tone of familiar rhetoric and by including factual material to propose an illogical content. The effects of these clashing juxtapositions are aptly described by critics Maurice Couturier and Regis Durand, who state that “Barthelme’s fictions … are maddening eye-traps: they cannot stand to be read or looked at, but seem to stare at us” (59). Two imagetexts from “A Nation of Wheels” that embody this play of contrasts serve to illustrate how the dynamic rearranging of factual everyday objects in a fictional work challenges conventional artistic representations and prompts meditation (Fig. 2.11).

The elements in most of the visual collages in this story are positioned and scaled to suggest movement, although the absurdity of the juxtapositions undercuts the perception of depth and motion proposed. On the first page, immediately under the story’s title—“A Nation of Wheels”—an imagetext begins the story in which combinations of photographically reproduced visual objects are placed next to blocks of text of varying lengths (135). The tire is the story’s main character, and, as critic Michael Heitkemper-Yates has noted, it is an “absurd adventure narrative” (5) in which the metaphor for domination appears “… in the form of giant, looming, faceless tires, [giving] Barthelme’s visual satire … a number of simultaneous readings” (6). The visual collage shows a photograph of a single tire that looks gigantic in comparison to a small figure in the foreground, the nineteenth-century image of a nude woman—a cut-out figure from a Dore woodcut engraving for Dante’s Inferno—in a posture that suggests she is running in panic. The tire, an enlarged photographic fragment, is seen as a familiar industrial object and as an item found in common advertisement images. This juxtaposition parodies sexually suggestive tire advertisements; instead of adorning the looming tire, the nude female figure runs away from it,
thus transforming a traditionally seductive relationship into an image of anxiety. The dissimilar nature of the collaged fragments brings to mind oppositions between the industrial and the natural, photography and the woodcut, and the nineteenth and the twentieth century.

Despite these contrasts, the image of the tire and the female nude are both torn from their contexts and strangely combined. Calling James Joyce “an exemplary literary collagist” in a 1975 conversation on fiction (Barthelme, “A Symposium on Fiction” 76), Barthelme makes a strong statement about the role of collage in art and literature. He says, “… the principle of collage is one of the central principles of art in this [the twentieth] century and it seems also to me to be one of the central principles of literature” (76). And although a collage tends to primarily emphasize the flat and surface-like quality of the objects it combines, the difference of scale between the tire and the nude figure and the positioning of the large tire behind the ‘fleeing’ nude woman gives Barthelme’s first visual collage in “A Nation of Wheels” the illusion of depth: the tire can be thought to move in pursuit of the figure. And yet, as soon as this motion is imagined, it makes no sense: tires do not independently move with the intent of pursuit, and the nineteenth-century body of the female figure seems more like a statue than a body in motion. The narrative that is intimated by the illusion of depth due to suggested motion in this visual collage is simultaneously undercut by its flat, static nature.

Fear characterizes the strange visual juxtaposition of the big tire and the small nude figure that seemingly runs away from it, but confidence—perhaps arrogance—is the contrasting tone of the adjacent verbal text. Four paragraphs of factual, fictional, historical, and explanatory data about the increased importance of rubber tires suddenly morph into absurd, humorous

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41 “A Symposium on Fiction” was a conversation with the author and Grace Paley, William Gass, and Walker Percy. 42 The female statue in the collage is of Thais and is taken from Gustave Dore’s images for Dante’s _Inferno_ (Dore 44).
statements that humanize the tire, depicting it as an agent of progress capable of acting independently. Moreover, subtle humor undermines in all seriousness the style and tone of the discourse used. The verbal statements reiterate what can be gleaned from the adjacent visual collage, the tire as agent of oppression is in pursuit of its frightened female victim. The conflict between a sense of fear in the visual collage and the tone of confidence in the verbal text enacts the intertwining of fact and fantasy in the verbal text, highlighting the irony generated by overly confident statements of the ridiculous. Together the visual and verbal collages work to evoke and frustrate meaning. Borrowing a term from art critic Harold Rosenberg, Barthelme calls his visual and verbal collages “anxious objects” (“Not-Knowing” 19). The idea is to create an art object whose magic combinatorial effects make unclear whether or not it is a ‘masterpiece’ or ‘junk’ (19). As a result, “it invites and resists interpretation” (20), and, in so doing, is inexhaustible.

A second imagetext from “A Nation of Wheels” (Fig. 2.11) inverts the relationship of the female figure to the rubber tire as well as that of the visual collage to the verbal text, resulting in an even more humorous and mordant critique of the domination of the industrial and the technical. The visual collage, which takes up the largest space on the page, includes the image of an ancient statue—a headless, armless, and clothed female—seated on top of two rubber tires in what looks like an absurd vehicle. As in the first imagetext, the contrast between stillness and motion, art and industry, and the ancient and modern are paradoxically invoked. Aside from appearing as a funny vehicle, the female statue on wheels—a Greek statue that connotes the artistic—seems strangely to be both dominant and passive: her size and bulk appear to overwhelm the tires while, on the other hand, her lack of a head and arms makes it possible to imagine that she is one of the artistic ‘artifacts’ of the museum that are being removed to make place for rubber tires, the new icons of American cultural history. Of the two verbal texts on this
page, one is a caption for the visual collage, which says, “The Venus of Akron.” This humorous caption echoes the visual collage, combining the startling and contrasting elements of ancient art, specifically the Venus de Milo, and the industry of rubber tires that originated in Akron, Ohio.

The verbal text situated above the visual collage declares that American cultural history is being rewritten to show that its development is due to the tire. It is also noted that other institutions such as museums have reorganized their exhibits to showcase the tire in compliance with the revised history. The absurdity and fictionality of the premise is made much more vivid because it is surrounded by plausible historical facts: actual and ongoing rewritings of history as well as the ideological compliance of institutions to the politically powerful. The term ‘cultural’ poses questions about the nature of contemporary art given the crisis of verisimilar representation, due, according to Barthelme, to the appropriation of the artistic by the photographic, technological, and commercial. However, for him, this appropriation can challenge the writer and the visual artist to find ways to renew their work. In this second imagetext, the written text, in conjunction with the prominent headless, armless statue on the page, ultimately suggests both the huge presence and importance of the artistic as well as the potential waning of its power in the context of the cultural dominance of the commercial and industrial. Ultimately, the two imagetext depictions of female figures and tires push the familiar and seductive advertisements that use sexy women to sell tires (and cars) in two extreme and anxious directions: the first turns the portrayal of the customary passive female figure into a victim; the second turns the seductive figure into a controlling dominatrix. In both cases, the literary reconfiguration turns the everyday commercially seductive use of women to sell tires/cars into an anxious partnership.
Barthelme’s stories and *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, which are composed of photographs and photographically reframed found images, exist in a critical and contestatory relationship to traditional and commercial depictions of the physical world that are abundant in an age of generalized visualization. The photographic nature of these visual materials and the quotation and/or incorporation of linguistic forms from various discourses bring fragments of the physical world into these fictional constructions. They call into question our common beliefs about photographic representation. Their use of the verbal draws from the vernacular and from diverse conventional discourses in order to, in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, artistically mine the poetic and elliptical qualities of the African American vernacular, and, in Barthelme’s stories, to call attention to impoverished language usage in order to prompt reflection about its renewal. The intertwining of the visual and verbal in these hybrid stories points to new ways of writing short stories by the creative and innovative deployment of the factual and fictional dimensions of the materials used. Finally, Hughes, DeCarava, and Barthelme find in their affinities with music a powerful and compact way to frame their expansive and artistic stories.

**RHYTHMIC FRAMING**

Hughes, DeCarava, and Barthelme use music—specifically the blues and jazz—to frame their imagetext short stories. Together and on their own, DeCarava and Hughes improvise like jazz musicians. DeCarava says that he visualizes sound by listening, concentrating, and waiting to see how a thought, idea, or attitude finds expression on a face. When he takes photographs of jazz musicians, he does not approach them as celebrities but as ‘cultural workers,’ and this approach allows him to focus on the musicians’ gestures as they play instead of on their public
images. In *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, Hughes takes DeCarava’s images and composes a story by free association, improvising a narrative in dialogue with the photographs, a commentary that, like that of the blues singer or jazz musician, draws from his own life experiences and, in particular, those of Harlem, the community he lived in and wrote so much about. The call-and-response pattern, which is a structure indigenous to African American blues and jazz, informs much of Hughes’s writing, including *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*. The narrator’s monologue in the short story enters into a call-and-response relationship with DeCarava’s photographs: the narrator’s calls introduce/address the photographic images that, in turn, respond to the call, at times agreeing with it, at other times disagreeing, and, mostly, at times in a position that involves both stances.

Barthelme, on the other hand, understandably relates to jazz in a very different way. Critic Michael Jarret notes that Barthelme is among writers “… whose main subject is not so much jazz as readings of jazz” (344). Barthelme uses the forms of contemporary jazz—bebop and free jazz—primarily as rhetorical devices, and this will be demonstrated in a consideration of the musical framing of his stories “Eugenie Grandet” and “Brain Damage.” Jazz allows him to compose and frame his verbal and visual collages in ways that make his stories innovative and thought-provoking challenges to conventional storytelling. When Barthelme comments on the writing process in his essay “Not Knowing,” he uses the popular song “My Melancholy Baby” and its infinite variations as an ideal model (23). It is pertinent to note that some of the more creative reinterpretations of this song have been jazz interpretations and it is certain that these reinterpretations were familiar to him. Like a musician, Barthelme states that what he writes will

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43 In his Introduction to DeCarava’s 1983 publication of *The Sound I Saw*, New York Times critic A. D. Coleman writes that the force of DeCarava’s images of jazz musicians lies in the fact that he sees them not as celebrities but as people working, doing what they love, much like the photographer himself (DeCarava, *The Sound I Saw* 8).
be based on the song’s chords as “… commentary, exegesis, elaboration and contradiction” (23).

His visual collages are also inspired by his love and knowledge of jazz. The parallels between two-dimensional collages and jazz are best represented in the work of African American artist Romare Bearden, whose “Jazz Series” collages and jazz photomontages in particular reveal how visual combinations of notes, rhythms, and blank spaces bring about a multilayered and complex work of art. 44 Attention to the musical framing of The Sweet Flypaper of Life and Barthelme’s stories in this section also draws from literary critic Mary Ann Caws’s work on modernist framing.

In her book, Reading Frames in Modern Fiction, Caws writes about passages in which borders are marked by musical intensity and/or are “… penetrated by musical structure …” (xi), and these thoughts, as well as her more general discussion of literary framing, animate this presentation of the blues and jazz framings of Hughes’s, DeCarava’s, and Barthelme’s works. Caws underlines the importance of framing in modernism: “… the principal texts of modernism emphasize the very idea of framing as it calls attention, above all, to itself and to the frames rather than what they include” (xi). Although she is writing about framing in texts that are modernist and primarily verbal, her insights about internal and external frames in literature seem even more relevant for literary texts composed with words and images as she herself suggests that an emphasis on framing involves hybridization: “… in some measure the art of framing is itself a will to the mixing of genres …” (4). When she writes, in another context, about how pages in the work of writer and photographer Claude Cahun “… graphically echo one another as verbal gesture is repeated in visual gesture …” (The Surrealist Look 113), her remark

44 As critic Victoria Trout explains when writing about musical rhythms in Bearden’s work, “Bearden acknowledged the parallels between jazz and the visual arts by blending the techniques of painting and collage” (66). Like collage, she says that jazz in Bearden’s artwork is, “… a musical form that represents the combination of numerous layers of notes and rhythms to produce one larger work of art” (66).
sagaciously defines a similar framing dynamic established by the dialogue between images and texts in Hughes and DeCarava’s and Barthelme’s stories.

Framing is naturally more immediately detectable in imagetext stories; however, the many clues that point to how verbal texts are framed presented by Caws urge a rethinking about what similar clues might point to in stories that are visual and verbal. Her discussion about the ways music can be said to structure a literary text provides ideas about how such clues as “repeats, delays, temporal markings” (Reading Frames xi) might work in similar and different ways in an imagetext work of fiction. Repetition, for example, vividly evokes the tempo of jazz and the blues: The Sweet Flypaper of Life’s call-and-response dynamic and Barthelme’s visual and verbal collage mirroring are repeated gestures that invoke musical patterning. Finally, Caws remarks on the way a focus on framing involves the reader: “… the heightened effect extends beyond the perception of the narrator out to the reader in an increasing experiential correspondence of alternate modalities” (7). The musical frames that inspire the structuring of these stories make possible the artistic compression of the expansive materials used. At the same time, the interstices between visual image and written text attract the reader/viewer’s eye and metaphorical ear to the tensions within and among image and text. Hence, the musical frames that condense the verbal and visual material of these stories also work to enlarge the intensities of each. In short narratives, open or closed framing functions to contain rich and dense material and contributes to its impact and interpretive potential. The examination of the musical framing of these stories involves thinking about the overall frame that serves to condense the narrative; internal framings such as DeCarava’s photographs in The Sweet Flypaper of Life and Barthelme’s visual collages are themselves purposeful constructions.
The frame of a photograph, of a photographic reproduction of an image, and of a short story is an unusually visible and interpretive gesture: it points to the composition of the photograph in the viewfinder and/or its cropping; it indicates a selection of one or more images torn out of context; and, for the short story, it compresses, tightly or loosely, the tensions that tend to arise more quickly in a foreshortened narrative. The meaning of photographs is most often derived from their context, which features the words that accompany them. However, in addition to being an integral part of the telling of his short story, the influence of jazz on the framing of DeCarava’s photographs is central to the blues and jazz framing of the story as a whole.  

Emphasis on the role of photographic framing is elaborated upon by philosopher Judith Butler. Writing about embedded war photographers and in response to critic Susan Sontag’s claim about the muteness of a photograph, Butler asserts the need to consider the purposeful and interpretive nature of the frame. She says, “… it seems important to consider that the photograph, in framing reality, is already interpreting what will count within the frame; this act of delimitation is surely interpretive, as are the effects of angle, focus and light” (Butler 823).

Much more visible and purposeful—although often confusing—are the intentions of the jazz-like leaps in scale and the shifts in viewpoint in Barthelme’s stories. These internal and external frames take the reader/viewer on varied dramatic and often deliberately chaotic digressions but also keep him or her on the beat of the concerns at hand. The frame of the short story itself is much discussed because of the focus of stories on beginnings and endings and

45 The most recent analysis of DeCarava’s photographs and their involvement with the blues and jazz forms as well as their contribution both to the art of jazz and to the 1960s black photo aesthetic is found in a chapter entitled “Roy DeCarava’s Jazz: Fine Art, Black Art and the 1960’s” in critic Benjamin Cawthra’s book, Blue Notes in Black and White: Photography and Jazz.

46 In her book On Photography, Sontag comments on the muteness of the photograph as she points to the voice it is given only by its caption and the context of its use. She says, “What the moralists are demanding from a photograph is that it do what no photograph can ever do—speak.” (108).
because foreshortening makes the formal structure of the story more immediately visible. Compared frequently to visual forms such as photography, the short story is said to be like the capturing of a fleeting moment with a camera. The juxtapositions of photographs, verbal text, and visual/verbal collages—the framed and framing materials that make up the short stories discussed in this section—create visual rhythms by prompting the eye to move back and forth across the work, rhythms inspired by jazz and the blues. *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* is presented as a call-and-response pattern between image and text whereby a solo voice (narrator) relates to the ensemble (various community members presented by the narrator’s words and the photographs). Barthelme’s stories, “Eugenie Grandet” and “Brain Damage” are analyzed as examples of his use of jazz as the organizing aesthetic principle of his visual and verbal collage stories.

**THE SWEET FLYPAPER OF LIFE: IMPROVISING WITH IMAGE AND TEXT**

The internal and external frames of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* exist in an ongoing dialogue organized by a structuring based on blues and jazz compositions. Hughes and DeCarava, independently and in collaboration, infuse the verbal and pictorial materials of their short story with patterns from the blues and jazz that serve to organize the narrative.47 This is not surprising given the central role of the blues in African American culture as well as in these artists’ commitment to the development of a black aesthetic. Mary’s dialogue in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* is an apt illustration of writer, music historian, and critic Amiri Baraka’s claim that “The blues is an actual secular day-to-day language given the grace of poetry” (262).

47 Critic and Hughes biographer Arnold Rampersad’s statement on the blues captures the tonalities of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* as is manifest in the spirit of Hughes’s writing and of DeCarava’s photographs. He writes, “Blues was a way of singing but above all a way of feeling, when the pain of circumstance is transcended by the will to survive—of which the most stylish token aside from the blues song itself, is the impulse to laughter” (20).
Furthermore, Baraka’s suggestion that African American music and especially jazz is an “endless update of the blues” (262) points to the innate connection between Mary’s blues-inspired monologue and the musical structures of jazz, a connection found in both Hughes’s text and in DeCarava’s photographs.

Although embodiments of jazz are specifically seen in the way DeCarava’s photographs evoke the sounds of the jazz musicians he portrays, the evocation of sound is an artistic effect that this photographer pursues and a quality often found in his other photographs. Additionally, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*’s themes of survival and resistance, joy and pain, find echoes in Ralph Ellison’s description of how the blues engenders a toughness of spirit: “The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism” (103). The blues and jazz framing of this short story summons the communal ethos of the writer and photographer’s works and condenses the materials of this story while allowing what is tightly framed to expand radially. The tension generated by the expansive visual and verbal materials that constitute this short story and its taut musical framing is embodied in the female narrator’s lyrical monologue in a way that seems to resonate with Angela Davis’s comments on the blues singer. What Davis says encapsulates both Mary’s dilemma and Hughes and DeCarava’s framing strategies: “By creating out of them [emotional troubles] a work of art, she [the blues singer] is giving herself aesthetic control over forces that threaten to overwhelm her” (129).

Moreover, this African American short story, like the African American musical structures that frame it, depicts a community whose survival depended on a double consciousness whereby implied meanings understood by the community are embedded in
statements addressed to the outside world. This doubling also works to condense this visual and verbal narrative. This intricate, indirect, and entangled short story is framed such that the artists give their narrator the freedom to improvise, innovate, and protest all within a beautifully wrought work. Two interdependent features illustrate the compact musical framing of this story: a dynamic of call-and-response and the trope of the narrator as soloist who speaks for and about the diversity of voices in the ensemble that is, in this story, the African American community represented by Harlem. These two framing devices are discussed using several instances in which they organize text and image in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* and make this imagetext short story a compact artifact with an infinite capacity to expand.

The tight framing allows the story to point radially beyond its frame; its verbal text and the photographic images exist in a dialogical exchange of call-and-response: while the text introduces the images and elaborates on them, the photographs respond and talk back in a dynamic that raises questions without providing any answers. As in the blues, where the first lines of the song constitute the call and the last lines the response and commentary, the text and images of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* are engaged in a call-and-response dialogue that is a foundational pattern of exchange in African and African American cultures. Typically, the call-and-response or recall pattern is a verbal or nonverbal exchange between a speaker and a listener whereby the speaker or caller sets the theme and the listener (singular or plural) answers the call with an improvised commentary. This device powerfully juxtaposes the verbal and the visual and guarantees an equal relationship between text and image in this story. Finally, the interrogative nature of this pattern encourages the reader/viewer to consider what might lie beyond what is framed, whereas its unconventional juxtapositions invite the reader/viewer to engage in a critique of traditional ways of thinking.
Two pages of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* illustrate the rich internal framing possibilities of such an imagetext strategy. The narrator’s monologue is the verbal text that, for the most part, acts like a caption and is placed on the page before the photographic image. Although in some cases the text as caption introduces the image using a period or exclamation point, it mostly presents the image using colons, suspension points, or question marks—devices that trigger an open-ended dialogue between image and text, a dialogue characteristic of African American call-and-response patterns. Reflecting the larger framing of this short story, the call-and-response strategy stages a dialectical tension between image and text that both keeps the expansive possibilities of the materials on each page within the larger frame and, at the same time, prompts the reader/viewer to think beyond what the framed elements suggest for a fuller appreciation of its impact. Toward the end of the story—on pages 86 and 87—the juxtaposition of images and texts exhibits the rich interpretive possibilities of the call-and-response moment (Fig. 2.12). A spread contains, on the verso page, a photograph of a few facades taken at an angle on a Harlem street. The first image is introduced by Mary’s statement of concern for her grandson Rodney: “What do you reckon’s out there in them streets for that boy?” (DeCarava and Hughes 86).

From the start, this open-ended question—placed like a caption below the street scene—challenges the reader/viewer to scrutinize the large photograph of the street that encroaches on the recto page in contrast with a smaller portrait of Rodney, above which is placed a short text. The text ends with a colon and sits above the picture of Rodney sitting on the street, smiling and dressed elegantly in a hat and trench coat. Despite the fact that the street photograph looms largest on these pages, the lack of any threatening elements in response to Mary’s ‘call’ makes the juxtaposition surprising, given the reader/viewer’s knowledge from the short paragraph on page 87 that tells us that Mary feels the need to protect her grandson. When the photograph of
the street is seen with Rodney’s gentle and elegant portrait on the facing page, Mary’s worries are perplexing. The prominence of the storefront of a lawyer’s office in the photograph can be thought to evoke protective services to the community. On the other hand, Rodney’s carefree smile—sometimes problematic for Mary, who worries that he is not serious enough—is indicative of his inner strength.

At first glance, Mary’s statements are incongruent with the photographic images because her worries about the dangers of life on the street find no immediate correspondence, either in the peaceful visual depiction of the street or in Rodney’s portrait. Under more attentive scrutiny, however, it is possible to identify elements in this photographic image that signal tension and confirm the narrator’s statements: the contrast of two storefronts and the detailed focus on one of them signal white absentee ownership in this neighborhood. The sign for a cleaner or dry cleaner shop, possibly owned by African Americans, appears in the background of the photographic image; in the foreground, the offices of a lawyer and insurance broker with a Jewish name are depicted, indicating, in the mid-1950s, that the owner is unlikely to live in this neighborhood or that the inhabitants of the neighborhood might be in need of such legal services. The peaceful ambiance of the street scene is now congruous with the dangers suggested by its caption since there might indeed be fewer opportunities for Mary’s grandson to stay in Harlem and thrive because, as suggested earlier in the story, to be successful, African Americans like her financially successful grandson must leave the community to find work. As in the blues, Mary’s ‘call’ (the text) has elicited ‘responses’ (in the photographs) that offer divergent interpretations: together, images and texts engage in a call-and-response dialogue that promotes critical questioning instead of giving explanatory or definitive answers. These two pages, fragments of a larger story, elaborate—in a pointed and multivalent way that responds creatively to the question
that frames the story as a whole—the way in which the diverse inhabitants of Harlem deal with life, given the pros, cons, and actual possibility of court-mandated integration that will bring about unforeseen changes. A sequence of juxtaposed images and texts exemplifies how the larger story is structured like a jazz and blues composition in which an ensemble comes to life through the solo improvisations of its members.

A second characteristic common to the blues and jazz informs the musical framing of this short story: the narrator who speaks singly of a community, a stance adopted by the jazz soloist who, in improvising, embodies a collective music. In another nod to the musical inflections of this story, Mary, the narrator and soloist commentator, exists for the reader/viewer as a voice and only appears visually at the very end of her narration. Mary speaks as if composing on the spot and, in dialogue with the photographs that adjoin her monologue, she speaks of a rich and diverse community, staging distinctive voices that play off each other as is common in jazz. The mostly understated theme of this story is presented creatively and with urgency in the form of the narrator’s gesture to stop time (and death) in order to tell the story of the entanglements of her community. By presenting and highlighting the beauty of the community using the poetry of its vernacular language and of its life encapsulated in photographs, this imagetext demonstratively challenges racial stereotyping. The musical movement of this visual and verbal narrative is effected by tonal shifts in the monologue and in the photographs that horizontally signal points of transition from family to community and activate a jazz tempo that instantiates moments of repetition with variation. As Mary’s monologue marks the beat, verbally and visually, moving back and forth from family to community, each improvised segment brings to light another aspect of the community. In jazz, a melody or phrase referring to something larger prompts endless interpretation and
reinterpretation both on the part of the improvising soloist and on that of the listener. In *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, image and text endlessly and obliquely interrogate and negate simple-minded conceptions of African American culture, resulting in a rich, dynamic, and varied literary depiction of community life. The reader/viewer is asked to respond to a myriad of commentaries about the bankruptcy of racial stereotyping and to take pleasure in reading and viewing this artistic portrayal of Harlem.

Mary’s monologue in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* centers on her grandson Rodney’s situation as a conundrum that mirrors the dilemmas of the Harlem community. This short narrative expresses her concerns about her grandson’s fate as portrayed in the many improvisational imagetext segments and sequences that constitute the short story. The narrator’s commentaries regularly come back to the question of Rodney; the future of Harlem becomes embodied in this character, who, it is suggested, does not want to leave the community that undergirds his identity. The precariousness of this stance is evident in the narrator’s anxiety about integration and the changes that might occur to alter Harlem. The narrator asks the reader/viewer to think about Rodney and speculate about why he might pose different problems for her than her younger grandchildren, who are depicted opposite Rodney at the beginning of the story.

A large size photographic portrait of Rodney and Mary’s statement—“And then there’s Rodney. Now, you take Rodney:”—place him at the center of a story about to unfold. The imagetext that follows the photograph of Rodney is a photograph of his parents hugging (Fig. 2.13) accompanied by a statement that informs the reader/viewer that Rodney can no longer live at home because of his fondness for partying or, as Mary says, of “good-timing” (6). The large photograph of the parents juxtaposed to the text on this page initiates a sequence of
improvisations and commentary on Rodney and his situation, located in a variety of family and community settings. This first imagetext suggests that Rodney, who loves the street, is literally now on the street. It effects a transition to the next and third imagetext that provides a new improvisation in a different setting.

The second imagetext in this sequence involves a lengthy verbal statement about the potential of the wayward Rodney that is situated above a photograph of a girl, said to be his girlfriend, who is depicted dancing in a public place (Fig. 2.13). To signal this change of place from private to public, Mary’s tone shifts: in the previous imagetext, Mary’s admonishing tone is juxtaposed to a tender image of Rodney’s parents that establishes a surprising contrast, whereas in the second imagetext, Mary’s protective and loving statements contrast with the energetic and defiant tones of the dancing girlfriend. The tonal shift marks a change of setting and confirms Mary’s comfort in interior spaces as well as her anxiety about public spaces. In addition to signaling the dangers of public spaces for Rodney, the photographic image of the young woman dancing takes on another meaning when considered in light of Mary’s identification with Rodney’s love of dancing. Mary’s comments infer that she sees herself in the image of the dancing woman, and by extension this imagetext becomes an homage to the importance of music and dance in the community as well as a warning against its addictiveness. The text as improvised commentary ends with a question mark that is echoed in the photograph: the woman dancing is looking to the right of the frame and is saying something in a vivid gesture that can be imagined to mimic the narrator’s question: “Where’s he [Rodney] at?” (7). A third imagetext improvisation finds him in the basement where young people are said to gather and socialize (Fig 2.13). Two images and texts that shed light on underground spaces serve to underline situations that might tempt and perhaps undermine Rodney’s chances of success. One photograph shows a
friend promoting conspicuous consumption and the other photograph is of a girlfriend ready to
go out and party. The verbal text critiques the distractions it sees in the two images at the same
time it applauds the communal spirit of the basement get-togethers as reunions “with them boys”
and a “nice girl” (8). The fourth imagetext in this sequence of commentaries on Rodney presents
yet another approach to Rodney’s partying, expressed with both praise and concern.

The following juxtaposition ends this sequence on Rodney: it involves a photograph of a
man of indeterminate age sitting at a table in a bar and covering his face by a large hand (Fig
2.13). On the left side of the image, atop a brightly lit yet blurry juke box, sits a text containing
two seemingly unrelated comments about Rodney. The verbal text tells us that Rodney has
emerged in slow motion from the basement to borrow money from his grandmother and that this
movement contrasts with his fast dance moves and love of music. The latter serves to establish a
link between the text and the photograph of the man and the jukebox. Hence, what looks
disconnected in the narrator’s statements is brought together by the photograph: the contrast it
stages between the foregrounded and brightly lit jukebox and the dimly lit figure of a barely
visible man whose hand gesture signals worry or tiredness makes sense of Mary’s concern about
the attraction of music and dance for Rodney at the expense of, perhaps, more serious endeavors.
This same contrast also evokes a generational divide that underscores Mary’s worry: the juke
box becomes the representative of music as youthful distraction at odds with the gesture of an
older man who looks away from the source of music. And yet, Rodney’s ability to recognize the
music of all of the known and important jazz musicians highlights both his intelligence and the
value and influence of African American music. The identification of Rodney, the character of
this short story, with jazz and that of its narrator with the blues places this work and its framing
at the musical core of African American culture. The sequences of imagetexts in The Sweet
Flypaper of Life draw loosely from the figure of a rebellious Rodney and branch out as commentaries on a variety of family and community situations in order to present artistically the question of whether or not this community will be able to retain its identity and thrive when faced with both imminent integration and racial discrimination.

Langston Hughes and Roy DeCarava make the poetry of African American vernacular language and the visual beauty of interior and exterior landscapes in Harlem converge artistically by musically framing the materials with which they construct The Sweet Flypaper of Life. In conjunction with the use of a pattern in jazz whereby a solo narrator embodies the voices of a community that is also visually depicted in terms that often defy its accompanying verbal characterizations, the call-and-response organization of the image and text relationship extends the significance of the short story beyond its contextual frame. It expands the power of the work by conjoining the verbal and the visual while simultaneously giving these materials an equal degree of autonomy. The use of musical compression within the tight constraints of the short story is also adopted by Donald Barthelme, who frames his stories inspired by jazz in ways other than Hughes or DeCarava.

BARTHELME: “EUGENIE GRANDET” AND “BRAIN DAMAGE”

Barthelme discovers in jazz an organizing aesthetic principle for his visual and verbal collages and a framework for his short stories. This connection is not surprising, given Barthelme’s interest in bebop, whose features, as described by Ralph Ellison, are quoted in critic Robert O’Brien Hokanson’s article on jazz, modernism, and Langston Hughes in ways that mirror the jazz-like effects of Barthelme’s short stories: “… it was itself a texture of fragments, repetitive, nervous, not fully formed; its melodic lines underground, secret and taunting; its riffs
jeering …” (2). Furthermore, Hokanson likens bebop to collage and montage, thus adding to the linkages between Barthelme’s stories and jazz forms: “… in its relation to ‘traditional’ jazz, bebop can itself be thought of as an African-American modernist form comparable to the Euro-American modernist forms of collage and montage” (2). Like free improvisation on minimally present melodies in jazz, Barthelme constructs his stories with found objects and what he calls ‘dreck,’ elements he improvises on to construct his visual and verbal collages, often directly quoting literary works or commercial slogans and clichés. The apex of the creative process is, for Barthelme, achieved by drawing rich associations and multiple variations from unaccustomed assemblages of mundane objects. Writing about the centrality of the blues-jazz dynamic in the work of Langston Hughes, Hokanson stresses the protest nature of bebop and free jazz, whose raison d’être is partly the rejection of commercialized music (2). The contestatory quality of jazz described by Hokanson resounds in Barthelme’s artwork when it addresses what he perceives to be the negative consequences of the spread of commercial and consumer culture. In essays and interviews, Barthelme comments on how experiences of live jazz performances impacted his writing.

In the 1997 collection of his essays and interviews entitled Not Knowing, Barthelme remarks on the difference between live and recorded jazz, emphasizing his preference for a live jazz concert because it allows the perception of many layered voices at once, much like the variations on a theme that he constructs in his stories, undoubtedly inspired by the formal strategies he detects in the jazz performance. According to Barthelme’s wife, Helen Barthelme, music—and jazz in particular—were always very much a part of his life in Houston, as an amateur drummer, and in New York City, as an avid frequenter of jazz clubs (H. Barthelme 133). Barthelme discusses aspects of jazz that influenced his writing in an interview with critic Jerome
Klinkowitz. He states that he admires the way jazz musicians improvise, taking the bare bones of a melody and developing infinite variations from its nuances. Barthelme further explains that the melody is not what interests him but that his main concern is the creation of variations, what he calls the “skeleton’s wardrobe” (“Interview with Jerome Klinkowitz” 200). In another interview with critic John O’Hara, Barthelme adds that variations in modern jazz pieces emerge from the musician’s selection of moments taken from a given musical statement, moments in which intensity is seen to unfold in improvisation. He sees jazz as a source of inspiration for his stories in its formal manipulation of minimal starting material (“Interview with John O’Hara” 276). Finally, he tells Klinkowitz that his love of music and jazz as well as his understanding of rhythm are akin to his preoccupation with rhythm in writing and with effects that can be created when words are juxtaposed in order to simultaneously evoke several levels of information and noise (“Interview with Jerome Klinkowitz” 205).

An examination of Barthelme’s story “Eugenie Grandet” makes manifest Barthelme’s jazz-like strategy of creating expansive variations and holding them together with an understated theme. The magazine version of Barthelme’s imagetext story “Eugenie Grandet,” published in *The New Yorker* in 1968, makes more immediately apparent the jazz-inflected framing of this short story because it is laid out on two pages, facing each other such that the effects of his use of typography are loudly visible. Barthelme’s many variations on Balzac’s story are separated by graphic dots, each one in the same position, separating each unit of text or image, giving, in addition, a beat and rhythm that highlights its moments of expansion and contraction (Fig. 2.14). Along with the overall reference to Balzac’s novel, these dots are the only unchanging elements.

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48 The three versions of this story all use the same pictures and graphic markings. The main difference is that its first publication in *The New Yorker’s* August 17, 1968, issue is laid out on two pages whereas the other versions in *Guilty Pleasures* and *Sixty Stories* present this story on several consecutive pages.
The title suggests that this is a short story about Balzac’s novel *Eugénie Grandet*. However, this is an ingenious and deceptive move: the understated point that emerges from close attention to this work is not Balzac’s story but Barthelme’s satire of contemporary literalism in the form of a meditation on book digest summaries. Barthelme’s story sounds like an homage to Balzac, and indeed Balzac’s realist novel provides useful cover for Barthelme’s target because of its veiled satirical elements.

The twenty-four fragments that constitute Barthelme’s story formally resemble the simplistic interpretations of literary works found on television and in summaries such as the one that heads this series of fragments, which is a quotation from the *Thesaurus of Book Digests* (Haydn). To discover the story’s satirical nature, it is essential to remember that Barthelme locates the essence of his short stories in their improvisations and not in explicitly stated themes and that his imagetext segments require attentive readings and viewings. A few of the segments of “Eugenie Grandet” mimic cliché psychological approaches to character; one passage mocks the bourgeois desire for portraiture, many provide sensationalist information about financial matters, and others reproduce or invent plausible dialogues full of meaningless banter and clichés. However far flung Barthelme’s commentary may seem, the power of his use of Balzac’s story resides as much in the elements that actually belong to the novel as it does in Barthelme’s improvisatory discursions. This short story becomes critical commentary because of how it frames the provocative assemblage of its elements. Barthelme selects themes from Balzac’s novel and at times even quotes entire segments of the original text in order to launch his improvisations—much like jazz musicians quote familiar melodies on which and from which their musical improvisations take flight.
Three imagetext segments of this assemblage improvise on and encapsulate the story’s pith, our dependency on the trappings of familiar framings. The improvisatory segments are the juxtaposition of a list, a caption, and a photograph purportedly of Charles, one of the main characters of Balzac’s novel; an outline drawing of a hand with a text indicating that it is Eugenie’s hand; a stock, old-fashioned image of a sporty girl holding a ball, purportedly an image of the small and delicate Eugenie. All the pictorial imagetext segments of this story are manifestly misrepresentations: they are introduced by dubious textual explanations that work like captions. Of the three, however, the fragment that includes a small photographic self-portrait is the most striking (Fig. 2.14): a photo booth photograph of a twentieth-century young man that the caption identifies as the nineteenth-century Charles, a juxtaposition that constitutes a forceful play on cultural beliefs about the truth value of photographs reminiscent of the gist of Barthelme’s story “The Photographs.” This imagetext is paired with the list (not shown) that precedes it, juxtaposing the common everyday photographic image of a man with the despicable listed activities of Balzac’s character Charles. This pairing invokes both a political, anti-colonialist statement and the deceptive and manipulative possibilities of the photographic image.

Instead of providing a summary interpretation of Balzac’s novel, Barthelme selects key elements of the story on which he improvises in order to craft an ironic reading of contemporary cultural habits. Other typographic strategies in this story create sound effects to make noise or silences. For example, what is referred to as “part of a letter” is graphically presented not only as the fragment of a letter but also as the truncated text of a letter. The ends of the lines are missing, making it frustrating and impossible to fully read. The silence of the missing lines is echoed by its opposite in another segment where the typographic repetition of the word “butter” is listed 113 times to loudly embody Eugenie’s anger at her father’s avarice.
The suggestion of sound in Barthelme’s combinations of the pictorial and the graphic with the verbal text in the short story “Eugenie Grandet” also characterize another short story, “Brain Damage.” All but the first and last pages of the City Life version of “Brain Damage” contain collages of pictorial, graphic, and textual material framed, like jazz, to activate myriad interrelationships among elements in oftentimes tangled responses to the story’s title. Each two-page spread suggests associations to the question of brain damage that prompt the reader/viewer to imagine meanings and ramifications when confronted by the juxtaposition of pictures, graphics, and text. Whereas the New Yorker publication of this story consists of two pages of eight segments of verbal text separated by headlines in capital letters, it is suggested that the expanded version in City Life, which contains a new feature, pictures, enriches the provocative nature and the interpretive potential of “Brain Damage.” Comparing the two versions of this story highlights the most immediately visible effect brought about by the addition of pictures: attention to the blank spaces between elements on the page. The specificity and separateness of the pictorial, graphic, and textual is highlighted to the degree that the dominant textual or verbal parts appear reduced. The reader/viewer’s attention is thus equally guided from loud typographic headline to picture to verbal text in a multidirectional manner that generates a three-way dynamic pregnant with possibilities but also short on answers. The juxtapositions are jarring and only a question—“What recourse?”—repeated like a drumbeat, keeps the reader/viewer involved by suggesting that such confusing assemblages might also be productive. Two pages from the story “Brain Damage” contain a verbal confession, three bold headlines, and a collage based on a reproduction of the statue Prometheus bound and the Oceanids, exemplifying the three-way

49 This story was published in The New Yorker with no pictorial images in the February 21, 1970, issue. Its segments of text are intermittently punctuated by a series of bold headlines that can be seen to parody journalistic headlines. The story discussed here is the one published in City Life, which contains pictures.
dynamic between the pictorial, typographic, and textual that defines the imagetext dynamic of
the story and its musical framing (Fig. 2.15).

Although the pictorial and the typographic elements on these two pages stand out more
boldly than its long, italicized verbal paragraph, contemplating these pages gives rise to uneasy
feelings of static oscillation between these three elements that arises from discomfort at a
perceived lack of direction and a questioning of conventions. The discomfort caused by the odd
juxtapositions converges with what critic Mary Robertson calls Barthelme’s postmodern concern
with the loss of spirituality manifest in the “flat positivism” of hegemonic and traditional
discourses (131). For her, the consequences of this loss are manifest in the lack of passion in
Barthelme’s stories in which elements are combined in “ungrounded free play” (137). Another
way of thinking about the tension and confusion in the juxtaposition of elements in this story is
to imagine each fragment as an improvisation on a given theme wherein the commonality of the
theme holds the story’s elements together by giving them the improvisatory space to expand,
knowing that the improvisation will end on the same phrase that triggered it. The movement
generated by the story’s musical structuring, which prompts improvisation as temporary
expansive commentary and calls it back, compels the reader/viewer to stop and look or reread.
The typographic, pictorial, and verbal units of the story interact spatially as improvisations on the
story’s main theme. The different units are bound by the existence of a discordant element in
each picture, graphic, or text that stymies either a gratifying or a dismissive encounter with the
collage. These dissonances thwart habitual reading and viewing practices and make possible new
associations and understandings. As in jazz, a discordant element jolts and moves the listener to
another level of perception, giving rise to new interpretive possibilities.
Barthelme’s collages disrupt comfortable readings and viewings, and this frustration creatively reorganizes the different parts on the page. The dynamic between the pictorial, typographic, and verbal collages on two pages of the story “Brain Damage” is established by how the juxtaposed collages point to each other: elements within each collage are seen to send the reader/viewer from one collage and page to the other, urging him or her to compose on the spur of the moment. On these two pages, the reader/viewer’s eye seems first to be guided to the headlines in bold capital letters. Here, two headlines from the City Life version (“RHYTMIC HANDCLAPPING” and “SLEEPING”) are statements of actions that appear contradictory, yet their complementarity is not impossible to imagine. The reader/viewer’s bafflement is preempted by the next headline, “WHAT RECOURSE?”50 However, since no specific problem has been enunciated, the eye then moves quickly to the next most visible element, a collage of the reproduction of a statue of Prometheus and the Oceanids to which Barthelme has added a reproduction of a drawn statue of a naked youth, legs crossed on a stone stool and looking down at the sole of his foot. The addition of the image of the sitting youth makes it impossible to contemplate the reproduced image of the statue as art or as a representation of mythological significance, or even to dismiss it as mediocre. Instead, the focus is on a less visible feature, its circular depiction of the confusing and somewhat anxious and chaotic bodily gestures of three entrapped human figures. The clash between the tranquil youth and the tense circular movement between Prometheus and the two Oceanids finds no resolution and consequently points the reader/viewer to the written text. The text—a long paragraph written in the form of a confession and full of unrelated trivial and important facts, confusedly interwoven and mechanically

50 Critic Robertson calls Barthelme’s use of large print headlines both an unfulfilled promise of a gloss or explanation and a loss of conventional and hierarchical distinctions between headline and text due to the uniformity and multiplication of the headlines (135). Her analysis seems especially suited to The New Yorker publication of this story.
expressed—startles and sheds no light on the visual collage. The contrast between the confessional format and its strange content underscores the lack of any ethical discursive framework. The frustration of meaning sends the reader back to the beginning, to the original question in the typographic headline—“WHAT RECURSE?”—or even back to the story’s title, “Brain Damage.” It isn’t until the last page that the question of brain damage is addressed.

The last segment of this story picks up the story’s title and presents the problem of brain damage as a global problem that causes both anxiety and relief. Anxiety because it seems that there is no recourse to this issue other than making art that makes the reader/viewer uneasy. Although Barthelme ends the story with a more detailed account of the ubiquity of brain damage, he does not provide any clarification, and the topic itself remains in the shadows as it does throughout the short story. As in jazz, the given and mostly understated melody remains a given and the anchor for the many improvisations that spiral away from it and come back to it and that can be ultimately seen to constitute and reconstitute the work. The pictorial, graphic, and verbal units are connected in two ways: they each originate as commentaries of the same starting point and they respond to each other by how they are laid out on the story’s pages. Separateness is as significant as connection: in isolating the verbal, typographic, and pictorial elements of the story, the blank or white spaces highlighted in many instances by the greater space given to the pictorial and the pictorial or collage nature of sentences in the verbal passages invokes, in a larger sense, the lack of a connecting discursive or pictorial framework. Hence, the framing of these three elements is not an enclosure; as in jazz, the units exist in an oscillating tension that remains productively open.

The central feature of the jazz and blues framing of these imagetext short stories works to rein in a potentially disordered unfolding of associations due to the combination of verbal and
visual elements while at the same time making space for unlimited exchange between image and text and within each independently. Themes, whether explicit or implicit, serve by marking the beat that introduces improvisation and digression or interpretation and reinterpretation. As in jazz, the open structure of the unstated or the understated is more than meets the eye, and interpreting its meaning becomes the responsibility of the reader/viewer, who is addressed on several levels at once. The stories’ internal frames set the musical tempo of the works and the tenor of the imagetext exchanges within the many digressions and improvisations. The larger or external frame of these stories is established by the way their understated themes appear in the interstices of the exchanges between photographs and verbal text or between visual and verbal collage. The musical framing of The Sweet Flypaper of Life creates a de facto challenge to racist stereotyping without ever explicitly stating it; what arises from the strident free jazz inflected clashes of and within Barthelme’s collages without, however, being named is a questioning of the commodification of language and culture.

CONCLUSION

This exploration of Langston Hughes and Roy DeCarava’s The Sweet Flypaper of Life and Donald Barthelme’s collage short stories has demonstrated the rich inventive potential of their hybrid constructions and attested to the continued openness of the short prose narrative to multimedia experimentation. These works prove the visual power of short narratives because photographic and photographically reproduced images are, along with verbal texts, integral and creatively imagined components of the story. Concepts from photographic theory enabled this different and new way of approaching the analysis of the short story’s visuality. These stories mined the photograph’s innate ambiguity by combining photographic images with verbal texts
that fostered equal and dialectic exchanges in order to enhance the enigmatic and writerly features of the narrative. The use of the photographic also implied a degree of incorporation of the factual or the world at large into the fictional work. These stories fictionalized and amplified these real-world appearances by playing on the edges of the factual and the fictional and confounding our expectations of depth, surface, and scale. Both the short story and the photographic depend for their impact on the strength of their framing. The potentially and unwieldy expansion of combinations of visual and verbal materials are artistically compressed and contained in these stories by the ingenious recourse to musical framing based on jazz and the blues, forms known to suggest more than what is expressed and to urge the listener to participate as co-creator.

In *Another Way of Telling*, Berger describes the “exceptional photograph” as one that “…quotes at length and increases the diameter of the circle even when the subject is totally unknown to the spectator” (121). This idea applies not only to photographs but can also be said to define the exceptional short story. Thinking about how the radial expansion of the photograph is a measure of its impact and expressiveness is suggestive of the power of the short story. The selection and development of the fragmentary events in a short narrative must, like the photograph that “quotes at length,” generate correspondences that grasp and hold the reader’s attention by reaching into past experiences and memories and by animating a desire to ask new questions.

Heightened ambiguity was seen to emerge from the dynamic interplay of images and texts as well as from the deployment—in the stories’ imagetexts—of the fictional and factual features endemic to the photographic image such that the verbal texts, in their own way, mirror the intertwining of these features. Myriad musical forms of the blues and jazz were seen to frame
these stories, the authors of which were also known to draw inspiration from the cinema. In its rhythms and montage sequences, cinema is more often than not connected to the musical tempo of jazz. And, the rise and development of both jazz and cinema coexist with the growth and formation of the modern short story. The next chapter aims to examine the connections of the short story and cinema by looking at the film adaptation of short stories as another instance in which the short story is found in conjunction with the photographic, albeit in a transcoded form.
CHAPTER THREE

FILM ADAPTATIONS OF SHORT STORIES

Jean Epstein’s *La chute de la maison Usher*, Robert Siodmak’s *Ernest Hemingway’s The Killers*, and Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Blow-Up*.

INTRODUCTION

Many short story writers, using the language of photography, refer to the construction of their stories as freezing moments in time. Commenting on what she learned from taking photographs, writer Eudora Welty states in her memoir, “Photography taught me … to be able to capture transience by being ready to click the shutter at the crucial moment…” (“One Writer’s Beginnings” 928). Bringing cinema into his remarks about writing, short story writer and novelist Julio Cortázar declares in his 1960 talk on the short story in Havana, Cuba, that there is much to be gained from thinking about the novel and the short story in connection with cinema and photography. Like Welty, Cortázar notes that the short story is like a photograph because of the photograph’s limited field and focus on scenic composition. He also remarks that short story writers and photographers speak similarly about “the paradox of the visible” to designate the need to frame a segment so tightly that it can explode its frame. He distinguishes the intense focus on a fragment from the construction of the novel and the cinema, where an “accumulation of the fragmentary” can capture a much broader and varied reality.⁵¹

⁵¹ Cortázar’s thoughts on the short story, photography, and cinema are found in his two essays, “Algunos aspectos del cuento” [Some Aspects of the Short Story] and “Del cuento breve y sus alrededores” [On the short Story and Its Environ].
In a later essay on the short story entitled “Del cuento breve y sus alrededores,” Cortázar alludes to the paradox of stillness and motion. He illustrates his commentary on the short story by using photographs, which he positions in a sequence of three connected images and two mirroring images. This form suggests both a continuing relationship between photography and the short story and perhaps a less stringent definition of the short story and the photograph as distinct from the novel and film (Fig. 4.0). His ideas regarding the still photograph can be extended to analyses of the moving picture. When film adaptations are viewed using digital technology (i.e., on DVD), the film can be seen both stilled and in movement, a strategy that brings forth renewed thinking about Welty’s idea of the short story’s ‘captured transience.’ Unlike Cortázar and Welty, short story writer Elizabeth Bowen finds direct affinities between the short story and cinema. Writing in 1937, she sees common ground in their freedom from tradition and in their self-consciousness about form and subject matter sources (Bowen 7). Inspired by the reflections of Bowen, Welty, and Cortázar on the connections between the photographic, the cinematic, and the short story, this chapter analyzes three film adaptations of short stories: La chute de la maison Usher, Jean Epstein’s 1928 adaptation of several Edgar Allan Poe stories; Ernest Hemingway’s The Killers, Robert Siodmak’s 1946 adaptation of the 1927 story “The Killers”; and Blow-Up, Michelangelo Antonioni’s 1966 adaptation of Cortázar’s 1958 story “Las babas del diablo.”

Studies of the impact of literature on the development of the classic Hollywood narrative film have looked at adaptations of novels—especially nineteenth-century novels—and drama, but less has been written on the role of the short story as a source text for film adaptations. Film theorist Kristin Thompson is one of the few critics who comprehensively discuss the influence of the short story in the development and formulation of the classical
Hollywood style.\textsuperscript{52} In a chapter on narrative form in early American films, Thompson draws parallels between the development of and the competition between the popular magazine short story and film (Thompson 163). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, short stories were a widespread form of popular entertainment in magazines and newspaper supplements, and they competed with films for the same audiences. Film studios actively sought short stories as sources for the construction of film screenplays and scenarios, and short story writing became more widespread and lucrative. The widely adopted development of rules or codes for constructing plots was, as Thompson outlines, based on the short story as a model, which was first defined by Poe and, in the late nineteenth century, reestablished by short story writer, professor, and theorist Brander Matthews (Thompson 168).

Thompson reminds us that the model that Matthews reformulated is that of the single strong impression created by the classical short story wherein action is continuous and all elements of the narrative contribute to the story’s impression and single effect (167-168). Although more elements are compressed in most narrative films than in a short story, the idea of the need to create a powerful effect on the viewer by marshaling all elements toward the climax of a dominant incident is, according to Thompson, normative for classical Hollywood films. Thompson also adds that these films “… tended to avoid the more innovative, contemporary forms of drama and fiction” (171). Despite the aesthetic difficulties and the economic disincentives to adapt experimental short fiction, non-traditional short stories generate rich opportunities to experiment within the cinema. Film adaptations of innovative stories, such as

\textsuperscript{52} The following two references are surveys of known short stories adapted to film: Stephanie Harrison, \textit{Adaptations from Short Story to Big Screen} (2005) and David Burmester, “Short Stories on Film” (1984). Essays on film adaptations of specific nineteenth- and twentieth-century short fiction abound. For example, it is well known that Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories are among the most adapted works, and much has been written on these adaptations.
those of Cortázar and Hemingway that are analyzed in this chapter, as well as Jean Epstein’s early adaptation of Poe’s stories view the source text as a chance to explore pressing questions about cinema and art.

This analysis of the film adaptations of Poe, Hemingway, and Cortázar’s short stories explores the strategies used in each film adaptation to think more deeply about how the cinematic captures the elements appropriated from the written source text to create a new work. It also discusses how visual representation arouses renewed interest in the short story’s visual impact, most notably the expansive effects of the short story’s compact framing and its use of detail. Unlike the traditional approach to film adaptation, which compares the literary work to the film and focuses on the idea of fidelity to the source, this chapter defines the relationship between the short story—the source text of the film—and the film adaptation itself in a dialogic and intertextual relationship as developed by film and literary critics Linda Hutcheon, Robert Stam, and Mary Ann Caws. For Hutcheon, an adaptation is “a creative and interpretive act of appropriation” and “an intertextual engagement with another work.” She writes, “… from the adapter’s perspective, adaptation is an act of appropriating or salvaging, and this is always a double process interpreting and then creating something new” (Hutcheon 20). In addition, she pays close attention to differences in modes of delivery and audience reception and to the contexts of the source text and its adaptation. The analysis presented in this chapter includes all three modes discussed by Hutcheon: telling, showing, and interacting. The stories tell, the films show, and, because the films are viewed on DVD, this analyst and viewer interacts with the film adaptation by stilling its motion and interrupting, controlling, and even reversing its intended forward narrative.
Like Hutcheon, Stam and Caws see the movement from the verbal to the visual as dialogic. In his book *Reflexivity in Film and Literature*, Stam defines the reflexivity of a work as its capacity to openly interrogate its status as a representation. He illustrates this idea by analyzing films that exhibit discontinuous narrative strategies, an anti-illusionist stance within an illusionist medium.\(^5\) He states, “All art has been nourished by the perennial tension between illusionism and reflexivity” (1). A central feature of the modern short story, the foregrounding of its construction, is a form of reflexivity. The short story’s reflexivity is a visual feature: its shortness and the intensity derived from its condensation make visible its beginning, ending, and framing. In *The Art of Interference*, Caws defines the movement between verbal and visual works as one of mutual interference. Caws refers to translation as hovering, highlights the oscillations between works, and points to significant moments between the call for linger and arrest. She writes, “We cross over in dressing, but not in bridging, we linger over knots, knowing lingering to be fruitful, and we long not for resolution but for the energy to delay” (21). The idea of and the effects of delay is akin to what film theorist Laura Mulvey suggests can be accomplished by using delay as a tool of film analysis.

Delaying cinema is made possible, according to Mulvey, by viewing films electronically and digitally, media that she says “… have opened up new ways of seeing old movies” (Mulvey 8). This involves two kinds of action: paying attention to the causes of a temporary halting of cinematic flow, such as the appearance of a photograph that brings in another temporality, and halting the film’s movement in order to analyze shots and sequences, a strategy that allows the viewer to repeat and return to film images, thereby manipulating and breaking the linear

\(^5\) The interruption of narrative flow is one of many strategies in film that, for Stam, involve exploring the dialectic of reflexivity and illusionism in film.
continuity of film. In both cases, the stilling of film reveals its photographic material basis and instills in the viewer a more complicated understanding of cinematic time (66). Hence, for Mulvey, delaying cinema makes evident its relationship to the photographic index. She states, “The cinema (like photography) has a privileged relation to time, preserving the moment at which the image is registered, inscribing an unprecedented reality into its representation of the past” (9).

The spectator of traditional cinema does not easily perceive its photographic basis, which is hidden by the illusion of movement in cinema’s present-tense narratives. The dynamic of stillness and motion that emerges from the visibility of the photographic in the cinematic is referred to by Mulvey as an aesthetics of delay:

Immutably mutates into movement that merges with the register of narrative time only to fragment again with a return to stillness and the register of the index. Not only do the uncanny qualities of the photographic index persist, but there is also an even more acute sense that time cannot be grasped and that, in cinema, ‘time that doubles life’ returns all the more clearly ‘brushed by death.’ (196)

To delay film is to meditate on the paradox of film—the simultaneous presence of movement and stillness—and, from this reflection, what film theorists call the pensive spectator emerges as an interactive viewer of film, similar to the critically reflective and creative reader.

The concept of the “pensive spectator” was coined by film theorist Raymond Bellour in his examination of how freeze-frame and still photographs impact a film’s audience. In his essay “When the Photograph of Cinema is Written” he writes,
The work with freeze-frames does in fact create the conditions of another time: it invents right when the work is carried out the conditions of reading … It gives rise to a space that encourages both free and controlled associations; in short, it shifts cinema’s hysteria by producing what one could call, taking a cue from Hugo, a pensive spectator. (84)

In another essay, entitled “The Pensive Spectator,” Bellour notes that stilled images in film interrupt film movement, introduce another time into the film’s here-and-now, and address the spectator directly. These techniques resist cinematic time and create anti-illusionist gestures that invite viewer participation by arousing one’s awareness of being a spectator. In this essay, Bellour expands on the effects of the still photograph in film, “Creating a distance, another time, the photograph permits me to reflect on the cinema. Permits me, that is, to reflect that I am at the cinema. In short, the presence of the photograph permits me to invest more freely in what I am seeing. It helps me to close my eyes, yet keep them wide open” (89).

Whereas Bellour’s prescient ideas about pensive spectators refer to traditional film viewing, Mulvey’s delayed cinema, influenced by Bellour’s writing, extends the idea of the pensive spectator to an exploration of films viewed on electronic and digital media. In this newer form, the viewer can manipulate the viewing of the film and, by controlling it, become a reader. The viewer thus introduces another temporality into the motion picture and further allows comparisons and juxtapositions of images within films and among different films. The chance to linger on photographic frames and to deconstruct film sequences by halting them provides the occasions to discover, even in more conventional films like The Killers, the fractures—instances within the film itself and/or interruptions made possible by digital
manipulation—from which to appreciate and reflect on the ways cinematic illusionism and photographic realism are problematized.

The short stories and their film adaptations discussed in this chapter were chosen because they explore questions about artistic representation in their respective media. The stories are innovative, exemplary and, implicitly, avant-garde experiments in short story writing. Likewise, the three film adaptations of these stories transcode the material from their source texts to investigate and test the power and limitations of the cinematic medium. The first film analyzed is a 1928 silent film adaptation of a few of Poe’s short stories, including “The Fall of the House of Usher,” by pioneer French filmmaker Jean Epstein. The discussion will show how film techniques such as the close-up and the rhythmic edit are deployed by Epstein in his cinematic re-interpretation and how these techniques, in turn, accentuate the visual aspects of Poe’s stories. The second film discussed is Robert Siodmak’s adaptation of Ernest Hemingway’s “The Killers.” Siodmak’s incorporation of this short story into a much more extensive narrative intensifies the differences between short story and film. The last film examined in this chapter is Blow-Up, Michelangelo Antonioni’s adaptation of Julio Cortázar’s short story “Las babas del diablo” [“Blow-Up”].

Like the writers and filmmakers of the first two film adaptations, Antonioni and Cortázar are innovators in their fields; unlike the writers and filmmakers of the first two film adaptations, however, they were contemporaries whose works, published and exhibited in the mid twentieth century, share common concerns about art and experience. Their works testify to their creators’ desire to vividly capture their subject matter and to struggle against conformism at a time when film and the short story are highly established and conventional genres. Antonioni’s film and Cortázar’s story more explicitly address the viewer and the reader and demand critical receptivity
to their work. This film and short story are envisioned and discussed in their spatial configurations, in their use of the photographic, and in concepts of the spectator and the reader that are implicit in these works.

JEAN EPSTEIN’S LA CHUTE DE LA MAISON USHER

*La chute de la maison Usher*, avant-garde French filmmaker Jean Epstein’s 1928 silent film adaptation of Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “The Oval Portrait,” includes passing references to other stories and demonstrates how the single effect of Poe’s short stories—detailed in his compositional principles and codified as a general prerequisite for the short story genre—appears, and is visually intensified, in the cinematic. Epstein’s extensive use of the close-up to depict Roderick Usher’s artistic obsessions and his use of the camera to see the world as anxiously as Usher does manages, on different terms and in a different narrative form, to recreate the tense enclosed atmosphere, as well as the frightful thrills of entrapment, in “The Fall of the House of Usher” and in the other Poe stories. Epstein most certainly read Poe’s work in its original form, and he visually captures Poe’s general tone. Although the title of this film foregrounds Poe’s story about Usher as the inspiration for the adaptation, the introductory credits indicate that this adaptation is based on several motifs taken from Poe (“d’après les motifs de Poe”). Epstein’s incorporation of “The Oval Portrait” and references to Poe’s other stories in the film allude to his discovery of a way to cinematically express and explore innovative ideas about film that draws freely and widely from Poe’s imagined worlds.
Although it is common for film adaptations of short stories to extend their source material in order to construct the film narrative, Epstein selects only those elements from Poe’s works that have cinematic value and that concentrate the film narrative to produce an adaptation that is, using Hutcheon’s terms, a transcoding of “The Fall of the House of Usher.” Epstein takes as much, if not more, inspiration from “The Oval Portrait.” The merging of material from the two stories is joined with brief visual and tangential references to two other stories to creatively recast its source material. Epstein’s choice of themes was intended to further his exploration of the film medium with no special concern about fidelity to the literary source. In his Écrits sur le cinéma, Epstein writes, “La chute de la maison Usher est mon impression en général sur Poe” (“The Fall of the House of Usher” is my general impression of Poe’s work,”201). And art historian and critic Stuart Liebman states, “He [Epstein] … carefully chose subjects that motivated or highlighted cinematic techniques” (Liebman 12). Epstein describes how he found in Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” the rhythm of a soul that he transfigured into cinematic language to present Usher’s “… âme au ralenti” (“soul in slow motion,” Epstein 191). Poe’s stories were ideal choices for Epstein; their focus on psychological states involved minimum action and favored the cinematic exploration of character subjectivity, a core tenet of Epstein’s ideas on the potential of artistic cinema (Liebman 247). Liebman underlines Epstein’s role as a theoretician of film: “Epstein’s film theory reveals him to have been an imaginative thinker grappling with many of the most important principles and problems of the cinema as an artistic medium” (Liebman 274).

Both Epstein and Poe were original and innovative practitioners and significant critics in their respective fields. Epstein, a member of the French Impressionist film movement of the early twentieth century, experimented with film narrative and structure in novel ways and wrote
copiously on the cinematic, and Poe wrote extensively on the principles of composition for poetry and for the short story as well as for detective and science fiction stories. According to Liebman, Epstein’s writings on film and aesthetics “… make [him] … the most productive and significant film theorist in France prior to the emergence of André Bazin” (14). His innovative use of the close-up, camera movement, and rhythmic editing, among other stylistic features, effectively portrayed subjectivity and character consciousness, uncovering the emotional power of film and its ability to arouse a strong and thoughtful response from the spectator. The most influential feature of the film that is derived from Poe’s work is its creation of a single powerful impression by selecting narrative elements based exclusively on their capacity to propel the verbal and visual toward its climax—a strategy that requires harnessing the viewer’s emotional attention. However, the enigmatic power of Poe’s short stories and the film adaptation also place the reader and viewer at a distance: the reader must remain absorbed in the short story despite being unable to identify with it; the captive viewer of the adaptation must accept a jarring confrontation with the unseen, the unnamable, and the mysterious.

THE CLOSE-UP

In adapting Poe, Epstein puts into practice his ideas on the cinema, most notably his wish to perfect subjective techniques that can provoke an emotional and aesthetic response in the spectator. The primary challenge of adapting Poe’s story is in figuring out how to phenomenologically present Roderick Usher’s mental state. In the film, Usher is no longer trapped as the double of his decaying mansion; instead, he is combined with the character of the painter in “The Oval Portrait.” Epstein marshals a variety of cinematic techniques to recreate the
uncanny atmosphere of these stories, and most commonly employs the close-up, which is, as Epstein notes, “… the soul of the cinema” (qtd in Liebman 253). Like the short story, the close-up isolates and magnifies its subject. It is both a discontinuous and fragmenting moment and operates as an active part of the film’s ongoing narration. Similarly, a short story is a fragment of what could be a longer narrative: a trigger for the reader to imagine alternative narratives and/or links to personal narrative associations. Furthermore, for Epstein, the cinematic close-up reveals what the human eye does not normally see, in the same way that the short story magnifies fragmentary moments to reveal what might go unnoticed in a longer narrative.

Film theorist Mary Ann Doane’s comprehensive analysis of the differing aspects and evolving conceptions and implications of the close-up begins with a nod to Jean Epstein, along with other French Impressionist filmmakers, who invented the term photogénie. Photogénie defines the essence of cinema as something in the cinematic image that exceeds language (Doane 89). This idea forms part of Epstein’s sense of the power of the close-up, which is for him a ‘magnification’ that adds something to the portrayed object, most often but not always the human face. When, as in Epstein’s films and especially in La chute de la maison Usher, the close-up involves a greatly enlarged image, it paradoxically shows more than a naked eye would see; it also suggests that some things cannot be seen.

The other feature of the close-up that is noted by Doane in Epstein’s writing is its potential to threaten “the unity and coherency of the filmic discourse” (Doane 90). For Doane and other film theorists, the magnification of the image and its greater proximity to the viewer is

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54 For Doane, the close-up of the face is the most common. She describes it as a fragmenting of the body (a ‘decapitation’) that illustrates how the close-up “… escapes to some degree the tactics of continuity editing” (90-91).
also a fragmentation that opens up a space for the viewer: “... the embrace of the close-up as autonomous entity ... is an attempt to salvage spectatorial space, to reaffirm its existence and its relevance in the face of the closed seamless space of the film” (108). Epstein’s close-ups of Roderick Usher’s face help him render the enigmatic atmosphere of Poe’s stories. In a silent film like La chute de la maison Usher, the face is the primary means of communication, and facial gestures speak directly, and provocatively, to the viewer. As Doane suggests, it is necessary to stop the film in order to restore space and agency to the spectator. Several close-ups of Roderick Usher are examined as occasions to isolate the image by foregrounding its detachment from the film’s spatiotemporal context. Epstein’s use of slow motion reveals the tiny sequential movements of Usher’s facial and body gestures while simultaneously making it seem that the film narrative is temporarily halted. Many sequences of close-up shots alternate with other close-ups or different shots in La chute de la maison Usher, but the most prominent shots are extreme close-ups of Usher’s face. These images resonate with the strange, enclosed, and vibrating physical and mental worlds of Poe’s stories.

Epstein was undoubtedly attracted to Poe’s writings because the expressiveness, drawn out rhythm, and emotional intensity of Poe’s fictional worlds present ideal material for experimentation with the close-up and with slow motion filming, techniques that, for Epstein, constitute the uniqueness of cinema. A paradigmatic sequence of close-ups begins about six minutes into the film, after the arrival of Usher’s friend at a local inn where the friend finds terrified responses to his request for a ride to the house of Usher. As the friend’s carriage disappears from the screen on the way to the mansion, two inter-titles announce a new setting and its dramatic circumstances: “USHER” is shown in capital letters, followed by text explaining that a nervous and tyrannical Roderick Usher dominates his wife, Madeline, and
keeps her strangely secluded in the house. Filmed as an action parallel to that of the arriving friend, the shot in the mansion begins with an extreme close-up of Usher’s hands, turning slowly with his body toward the viewer. The viewer is obliquely introduced to Roderick Usher by alternating close-up shots of his hands, his palette, and his turning hands again, and finally a close-up of his face, looking offscreen at the image in the next shot, the top of a picture in a very elaborate, shiny, and large frame. Another facial close-up of Usher precedes a long shot of the main hall where, for the first time, we see Madeline with Usher and the framed portrait as small figures. Suspense and the emphasis on a subjective dimension is created by the gradual construction of the full scene from the close-up images of its component parts. Similarly, the extreme close-ups of Usher’s face suggest madness, aloofness, and a dangerous mysteriousness. This sequence visually establishes Roderick as obsessed with painting; it is also the first moment of an unfolding drama to be presented as steadily climaxing in the next two sequences of shots, which are set in the house of Usher before the arrival of the friend.

The second and third sequences of close-up shots are connected by their physical representation of the relationship between Madeline and Roderick. The portrait being painted is of Madeline, and its painting by Roderick is strongly resisted by her. The second sequence begins with a close-up of Roderick’s face that cuts to a medium close-up of Madeline and then to three close-ups of Roderick’s increasingly tense and clasped hands, images that alternate with medium close-ups of Madeline reluctantly posing. The close-ups end with an image of the palette, followed by medium close-ups of Roderick and Madeline that show her wish to leave the room and his aggressive look that commands her to stay. The third series of alternating close-ups brings this situation to its first dramatic climax: in the alternation of close-up shots of Roderick’s hands and the brush applying paint to a canvas in which the only visible feature is its
frame, an extreme close-up of this action cuts to a medium close-up of Madeline, who touches her ‘wounded’ cheek almost immediately after we see the brush apply paint to the cheek on the canvas, which suggests that a piece of her cheek has been taken away.

Without words, it has been established that Roderick’s painting wounds his wife and that she reluctantly submits to a spell that permeates the house and its inhabitants. Film critic Richard Abel notes that Epstein’s fragmented and elliptical presentation results from the importance of the close-up as a “magnifying agent” and that in this film, close-ups are used as “… an associative chain from hands to palette, from eyes to painted image” (39). This segment ends with the arrival of the friend and shots of a strange drawing of a dilapidated mansion that appears, because of its obvious difference from the scenes showing the entrance to the house of Usher, to have a forced connection to the images of the mansion. The fact that this depiction of the house of Usher is jarring and unconvincing underscores the central role of the close-up in the cinematic transcoding of Poe’s fusion of the decaying mansion and Usher’s mental state.

Although the many close-ups of Usher’s face and body parts embody the atmosphere found in Poe’s stories, one close-up filmed in slow motion strikingly encapsulates the entire tone of the film and, in so doing, translates the single tonal effect of Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher.” In a chapter on the close-up from his book *Cinema: The Movement-Image*, Gilles Deleuze defines the close-up as both a type of image and a component of all the images of a film. He cites filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein’s remark that the close-up can provide an affective reading of the film as a whole (Deleuze 87). A series of close-up shots of Roderick Usher embody the affective tenor of the film: a medium shot of Roderick in grief, looking at Madeline in her casket, which lies near the portrait; a close-up in slow motion of Roderick suddenly looking up at the portrait,
showing tiny movements on his face as he reacts to his wife’s corpse and looks at her lifelike portrait; and a medium shot of Madeline in her open coffin on the floor of the main hall adjacent to her portrait while Roderick kneels by the coffin holding a book on magnetism with which he will try to revive her.

Knowing that the coffin is about to be covered, Roderick, in this medium shot, stares at the portrait, and this encounter magically lifts him up off the ground. The camera then moves in to an extreme close-up of his face that begins the series of images that leads to the scene’s emotional climax. The camera lingers on his face to accentuate his tears, his sadness and the confusion evinced by the subtle movement of his lips and eyes. After a cut to a medium shot of Madeline’s portrait, the camera comes back to a long close-up of his face, showing his lips breaking into the beginning of a smile, which is matched by his eyes and arching eyebrows. A quick view of the approaching coffin lid intersects, and a final lengthy and dramatic close-up of Roderick’s face shows it lighting up, his mouth and lips in a tentative expression of joy that suddenly reverts to pain and anguish followed by confusion and sadness. The combination of close-up and slow-motion techniques and their disruptive and forward-moving qualities condenses and intensifies the scene by showing Usher’s emotional state in all its contradictions.

The succession of emotions that appear on Roderick’s face are reminiscent of the narrator of “The Oval Portrait” describing his emotions upon seeing and gazing at the painting of the young woman; he feels progressively surprised, confused, overcome, and terrified (Poe, “The Oval Portrait” 251). Roderick’s shifting emotions, shown in this extreme close-up, concentrate what is represented in the various cinematic forms that depict his mental state throughout the film. If the close-ups are seen as forming part of the film’s continuous, albeit
elliptical, narrative, they are also moments of interruption, similar to moments in the poem “The Haunted Palace” in “The Fall of the House of Usher.” As if seen in close-up shots, the architectural features of the palace in the poem are those of a magnified face that repeat and echo the earlier description of the facialized surface features of the Usher mansion, which, in turn, recall Roderick Usher’s ghastly appearance, an appearance that is found repeatedly in the extreme close-ups of the terrified Roderick’s face. Epstein encapsulates Poe’s gloomy atmosphere in the subjective visual cinematic explorations of his close-ups of Roderick Usher’s states of mind.

RHYTHMIC ACCELERATION AND THE STILL MOVING

Epstein and other Impressionist filmmakers edited their films with the intention of demonstrating cinema’s power to subjectively transfigure reality and its capacity to reveal what is normally invisible. Film theorist David Bordwell points to editing strategies commonly found in most Impressionist films of Epstein’s era that are intended to demonstrate the power of cinema: “the glance/object edit” and “rhythmic editing” (Bordwell 185). The “glance/object edit” imbues filmed objects with a subjective point of view; a shot of a character who looks offscreen is followed by a shot of the object being looked at from the character’s point of view, followed by a third shot of the reaction of the character who was looking (190-195). For Bordwell, this editing strategy turns the inanimate object into an object that is made highly dramatic in order to become an integral part of the narrative (193-194). This kind of edit is seen throughout La Chute de la maison Usher and serves to intensify its central motif, the portrayal of Roderick’s soul. The other edit noted by Bordwell as a major component of Impressionist films is the rhythmic edit. It is described by him as “… the rhythmic relationships between
shots …” and is said to transmit states of mind to objects by how they are filmed (195). The
tempo of a character’s lived experience is communicated to the viewer by an increasingly rapid
succession of alternating shots. This strategy intensifies the tension already visible in the
extreme close-ups of Roderick by reflecting—in his surroundings and in the objects he sees—his
mounting mental anxiety. A rhythmically accelerated sequence of shots beginning forty five
minutes into the film, shortly after the funeral procession and burial of Usher’s wife, Madeline,
and upon the return of Usher to the house, both echoes the quality of the close-up shots of
Usher’s face and depicts the increasingly terrorized Roderick, who believes that he prematurely
buried his wife.

This exemplary five-minute, rhythmically edited sequence begins with images of nature
in movement (trees, water, mist, clouds, lightening), announcing the storm that sets the mood
for the climax of the film: the dramatic return of the prematurely buried Madeline, the
destruction of the house by fire, and the escape of the characters. Acceleration is achieved by
increasingly shorter shots of the same objects and a progression moving from the juxtaposition
of animated and still objects to the animation of the inanimate objects. This sequence depicts the
increasingly fast emotional development of Usher’s anxious mental state as he confronts his
frightening secret. Spatially, this segment begins with a full shot of the ground floor of the
house, followed by full and close-up shots of moving and still objects, therein also signaling, by
decomposition, Roderick’s inability to contemplate the situation. The camera then moves to an
adjacent space, the main hall of the house, where Roderick and his friend sit and wait in
frightening monotony and silence, as informed by the inter-title. Eventually, the images of
moving objects on the ground floor are merged with images of people and objects in the main
hall to depict Usher’s increasingly frenzied mental state in its affinities with the doomed
dwelling: even what is not meant to move, including the room itself, becomes animated when viewed from Usher’s anxious perspective.

This rhythmic sequence of shots moves from these landscape images to a freeze-frame of the ground floor of the house that includes no human figures. In the first series of images, movement is juxtaposed to a motionless armorial trophy statue behind which curtains billow, a grandfather clock with moving pendulum and hands, and a black cat that snuggles at the feet of the armored statue. Some of these shots are close-ups and some are medium or full shots; all include both the still and the moving. The tenor of these shots is best described by the direction of movement of the shots of the grandfather clock, an object that recurs throughout the whole sequence. If the first shot of the clock is that of a stately piece of furniture behind which curtains move in the wind, the shots that follow are increasingly extreme close-ups of parts of the clock that culminate in a tight framing of only the enlarged and shiny pendulum itself, moving obliquely from the top left corner of the screen to the bottom right, seeming to appear out of darkness, to cut through the screen and to disappear again. Its dark surroundings, uncertain origin and destiny, and threatening regularity signal the ambience in Poe’s “The Pit and the Pendulum.” The sequence ends as Roderick exits the frame into darkness.

The hinge that brings together and animates all of the objects and characters in the house is the regular repetition of varied images of the grandfather clock. It marks the beat of the accelerating rhythmic sequence prefiguring the film’s climax and, in its depiction of the still moving features of the clock’s face and hands as well as in the movement of its encased pendulum, it obliquely echoes the parallel close-up images of Roderick Usher’s face. As the viewer is brought closer, alternating shots of Usher’s facial expressions show an intensification of emotional distress, culminating in a dementia-like state. The climax, the return of the
prematurely buried Madeline, is the object of a last rhythmically edited sequence of alternating interior and exterior shots that take place during a storm. Unlike in Poe’s story, Madeline’s return does not kill Roderick nor does it make the house implode. The characters escape from the burning mansion in what appears to be a happy ending. The moving objects, and more specifically the wheels and gears of the inner mechanism of the clock, depict Roderick’s mounting anxiety and can also be seen as mechanically similar to the cinema camera and, perhaps more significantly, to the invisible movements of the projector.

The power of cinema in this film lies in stressing movement by contrasting it with still images, a feature that can be explored by revisiting Madeline’s portrait. Today, it is perhaps difficult to understand why Epstein places a still photograph of Madeline in the frame of a supposedly painted portrait and why this same photograph is seen to move when Madeline blinks. Is the inclusion of a still photographic image—which is clearly a still image of the Madeline the viewer sees in motion in the film—that inevitably connotes the material basis of film an anti-illusionist gesture in this film? Epstein’s highlighting of the paradox of cinema is strange given his claim that the essence of cinema is movement. Such anti-illusionist filmic stances are usually critical reflections about conventional film narratives, but these conventions had, in 1928, only recently begun to dominate the medium. The depiction of Madeline’s portrait as a moving photograph, the fact that Roderick paints this portrait on a canvas at times when it is strangely disconnected from the film’s framed photographic portrait, and the presentation of the photographic in an elaborate frame more appropriate for a painting, nevertheless—and perhaps despite Epstein’s intentions—prompts a modern audience to reflect on the uncanny still and moving qualities of cinema. But in the late 1920s, however, the techniques explored and used by Epstein were less about critique than they were about the power of cinema.
While reading Poe, Epstein was possibly sensitive to the connections between the likeness of a photographic portrait and the live qualities of the painting in “The Oval Portrait.” This connection can be established if it can be shown that Poe’s interest in photography somehow migrated to his stories. In his dissertation on Poe’s writing and American culture, *The Man of the Crowd: Edgar Allan Poe in his Culture*, literary critic Robert H. Byer notices a shift in Poe’s writing due to his ideas about photography. Poe writes three magazine articles on the daguerreotype a year after the invention was made public in 1839, and these articles show a keen interest and knowledge of the process. Byer notices a transformation in Poe’s treatment of the double and the gaze and an emphasis on the social and dramatic consequences of photography’s potential to observe the individual with exactitude. He finds these changes in Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd,” published in 1840 after Poe’s articles on photography. Compared to painting where, upon close examination, “… traces of resemblance to nature will disappear …” Poe describes what the daguerreotype image can do: “… the closest scrutiny of the photogenic drawing discloses … a more perfect identity of aspect with the thing represented.” Poe declares that the daguerreotype is supreme perfection and “miraculous beauty” (“The Daguerreotype” 38). “The Oval Portrait” was written in 1842 and reprinted in 1845, and his depiction of the painted portrait in the story might be seen to have incorporated the frightening qualities and “miraculous beauty” of early daguerreotypes. The lifelikeness found by the ailing and perhaps hallucinating narrator of “The Oval Portrait” can refer to the photographic qualities of a painting as well as to the story of the painting’s effects, since photographs were, in this period, commonly believed to sap the spirit of the person who posed.

Epstein’s use of a photographic portrait, his predilection for the close-up and the extreme close-up, and his juxtaposition of objects to create an intensifying and staccato rhythm interrupt
the cinematic narrative even as they build its continuum. The stilling force of the close-up suggested by Doane, the critical potential of the still image in a film noted by Bellour, and the discoveries made possible by digitally halting and ‘reading’ the film described by Mulvey, open up spaces for viewer participation and active thought about this film, both creatively and historically. This filmic transcoding of Poe’s verbal material finds echoes in critical moments of arrest that are visually significant in his short stories. By removing the image momentarily from its spatiotemporal coordinates, the close-up appears as a flat, surface image. This quality is also a feature of Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” in the scan-like descriptions of the surface of the house that, like Epstein’s close-ups of Roderick’s facial expressions, interfere with the continuity of the narrative. In addition, the short story’s narrative is graphically interrupted by the poem “The Haunted Palace,” which functions like the film’s close-ups.

Both the film and the story include elements of the tale “The Mad Trist,” which, like the film’s rhythmic editing, foreshadows and accelerates the story’s climax while simultaneously creating pauses for reflection. The interstices of the film’s juxtaposition of still and moving parts recall “The Oval Portrait” when the narrator’s tale of the encounter with the portrait is placed next to the long quote from the book that tells the story of the portrait’s execution. The contrast between these elements opens up spaces for the reader to ponder the impact of such connections. These moments of arrest intersect and fragment the continuity of the film and the short stories and create powerfully provocative and visually significant openings. Their existence fosters endless inquiry about the film and the story and serve as a source and inspiration of the numerous, diverse, and ongoing adaptations of Poe’s stories in all media.
ROBERT SIODMAK’S ERNEST HEMINGWAY’S THE KILLERS

Robert Siodmak’s 1946 noir film adaptation of Ernest Hemingway’s iconic story, “The Killers,” is an extension of the short story that, despite being a classic Hollywood narrative noir melodrama, recreates, in its cinematic transcoding, the enigmatic spirit of its source text. This discussion will read and view the film adaptation (*The Killers*) and the short story (“The Killers”) transversally to find in the writer and the cinematographer’s styles self-reflective openings and moments of pause. Although the film is credited to Siodmak, the adaptation has a wide and complex history in which Siodmak is only one of many creative figures. Reported by critic Oliver Harris, the producer Mark Hellinger, a journalist who specialized in underworld stories, was eager to add social realism from hard-boiled stories to gangster films and thus convinced Universal to buy the rights to Hemingway’s story for his company (Harris 80). “The Killers” became an iconic model for the hard-boiled genre, and its elements of social realism carried over to the film. Hemingway’s celebrity was so important in selling the film that his name appeared in the film’s title and was prominent in all of its advertisements. Several authors were involved in the writing of the screenplay, including Anthony Veiller, Richard Brooks, and John Huston, although Veiller was the only credited writer. Hellinger wanted to hire director Don Siegel, who would later direct a 1964 adaptation of the story, but he was not available.

Siodmak’s biographer, Deborah Lazaroff Alpi, states that, according to Hellinger, Siodmak made many additions to the script (Alpi 154), and she underlines moments in the film that are characteristic of his style, concluding that *The Killers* is considered one of Siodmak’s best films and “one of the finest examples of a literary work adapted to film noir” (323). Despite the many artists involved in this adaptation, Siodmak is seen by his critics to have brought to the
film a unique combination of German expressionism and French poetic realism. His pre-Hollywood work in German and French film was influenced by Orson Welles’s film *Citizen Kane*. In his article, “Notes on Film Noir,” film critic Paul Schrader remarks on the intricate interweaving of expressionism and realism in films such as *The Killers* and situates them as part of the early postwar realist moment of the film noir style, which was characterized by contradictory elements such as the use of studio lighting for location shots (Schrader 585-586).

Film critic Harris notes that Siodmak’s interest in psychological trauma in domestic settings and obsessive relationships, gleaned from situations in his prior films, points to possible differences with the ideas of his collaborators about the direction of *The Killers* and gives it, according to Harris, “… the internal contradictions and covert textual operations that make *The Killers* especially interesting” and that are not found in films where he was given more autonomy (80). The internal contradictions in the film adaptation invite the viewer to reflect on Hemingway’s short story, starting with its connection to film noir and hard-boiled fiction.

“THE KILLERS”: CONTEXT AND SUMMARY

“Talking Tough,” a chapter from literary critic Erin A. Smith’s book on working-class readers and hard-boiled and pulp stories, sounds like a definition of the tonality of the language used by the killers in Hemingway’s short story. Smith’s definition of tough talk—common, “tough guy vernacular style” consisting in short sentences, uncomplicated vocabulary and grammar, and an absence of affect—accurately depicts the gangster’s understanding and usage of language to threaten and dominate in the lunchroom scene of Hemingway’s story (Smith 126-149). The connections between Hemingway’s style and hard-boiled fiction is also explored by literary critic Leonard Cassuto, who states, “… of all of Hemingway’s fiction, ‘The Killers’
is cited most often for its affinities to the emerging hard-boiled genre” (44). Cassuto stresses Hemingway’s “anti-sentimental sentimentalism,” his minimal expressiveness, and flat tones as features taken up by the writers of hard-boiled fiction (45-46). Hemingway’s stories are seen, according to Cassuto, to evoke and then obstruct expressions of sympathy, a feature that is also present in hard-boiled stories. Films made in the noir style were typically adapted from the most well-known hard-boiled writers; and noir filmmakers used realism and expressionism in the transcoding and reconfiguration of these literary source works.

Film critic Robert Porfirio draws attention to such affinities between hard-boiled stories and noir films when he calls Hemingway “… the acknowledged father of the hard-boiled school of fiction which provided film noir with its most notable literary antecedents” (“Expressiveness of Sound and Image” 177). Some of the salient features common to the aesthetic styles of hard-boiled stories and film noir are disorienting beginnings and endings, a divided and dysfunctional social scene, tough-talking dialogue, terse narrative, a combination of elements from crime melodrama and gangster films, a threatening femme fatale, and an investigating chief protagonist, usually a detective or insurance man. Hemingway, in addition to being a precursor to hard-boiled literature and, somewhat obliquely, to the film noir style, wrote in a cinematic style that, although more prominent after the 1930s, exists already in his earlier works like “The Killers.”

Commenting on another Hemingway story, literary critic Eugene Kanjo emphatically describes how it emulates cinema: “In the story’s cinematic style—light as the source of moving images within frames opposed to the darkness between frames—Hemingway seeks the still center of being, illusory as the illusion of motion pictures” (10). In his book Cinematic Fictions, another literary critic, David Seed, considers Hemingway’s writing in the context of the
interrelationships between modernist writers and the cinema. He stresses the experimentation that centers around and explores the nature of visual perception in modernist writing and discovers the cinematic in the “visual immediacy” of Hemingway’s style (Seed 68). He compares Hemingway’s sentences to frames in a filmstrip, which give the viewer glimpses of actions in sequence, and he poignantly observes that, in effacing the narrator, Hemingway is more of an “observing presence” (76).

Hemingway’s story begins in media res: two gunmen enter a diner (called a lunchroom in the story) and proceed to terrorize the counterman George, the customer Nick Adams, and the cook Sam. The intent of their sudden arrival is unknown until the middle of the story, shortly after an incident that is described as a photographic gesture. They have been hired to kill an ex-boxer called the Swede [Ole Andreson] when he is to arrive at the diner. They leave when the Swede doesn’t show up, and it is unclear whether or not they will kill him. Some critics have read the fact of the killing back into the story from the film,55 while others have assumed it (perhaps based on George’s statement in the story), and at least one critic, Harris, has noted that the horror of the story lies in the fact that the killing doesn’t happen (Harris 88). The second scene of the story takes place in the ex-boxer’s room: Nick has gone to warn him about the killers and discovers that the Swede will not escape, saying only “I got in wrong” to state why he passively awaits his killers (Hemingway, “The Killers” 288). He faces his death lying in bed and looking at the wall.

55 Stressing the importance of the fact that we never know if the Swede gets killed in Hemingway’s story, Harris underscores a common misunderstanding some critics make in relating story to film: “The first error effectively rewrites the story in terms of the film, projecting backwards onto the source precisely what is absent from it: Swede’s death” (88).
In the third and last scene of the story, after learning from the woman who looks after the rooming house that the Swede was an ex-boxer but a gentle man, Nick returns to the diner to inform George and Sam. George provides speculative answers for Nick’s questions about the Swede’s behavior, suggesting that he was probably involved in something shady in Chicago and that he most likely “… double-crossed somebody. That’s what they kill them for” (Hemingway, “The Killers” 289). This short story, one of Hemingway’s most condensed and elliptical, has generated critical controversy, especially in light of the stark contrast between the story—a minimalist narrative exemplary of Hemingway’s iceberg theory—and the very popular film adaptation, a significantly expanded narrative of which elements are often misread back into the story by critics, as noted by Harris.

Like a camera, Hemingway uses his stage-directing narrator in “The Killers” to focus the reader’s visual attention and to instill a menacing and confusing visual pace in the story’s lunchroom scene. In this story, one of the gangsters is described as “a photographer arranging for a group picture” (283). This statement ironically summarizes the tension created in the lunchroom by the unexpected arrival of two gangsters. The idea of the group photograph plays on its double meaning; the everyday family or group photograph can also refer to the photograph as a means of surveillance and control. This scene occurs in the middle of the short story, when the tension about what will happen to the victims in the diner mounts.

Although all literary critics seem to agree that this story’s radical concision and open-endedness prompts readers to react to its surface descriptions and extract its meaning from their inner experiences, they differ on whether Nick Adams or the Swede is the focus of the story. Some literary critics say it is the Swede’s story because of its ending and because of its external focalization, even though it is clearly part of the Nick Adams initiation stories. Arguing that the
focus of the story is Nick Adams, literary critic Robert Paul Lamb, however, distinguishes it from other Nick Adams initiation stories because of its open ending. In contrast, literary critics Gerry Brenner and Steven K. Hoffman state that it is clearly Nick’s story and stress the centrality of the theme of impersonal evil, visible largely in the endless confusions in the story, such as the clock being too fast, the menus unreliable, the lunchroom having been a saloon, etc., confusions that intensify the threatening uncertainty brought about by the killers’ unexplained and sudden intrusion.

Published in 1927, first in *Scribner’s Magazine* and later in a collection entitled *Men without Women*, “The Killers” continues to generate controversy about its subject and main protagonist and thus shows evidence of the power of the story’s minimalism. As Hemingway stated, “The Killers” “… probably had more left out of it than anything I ever wrote … I left out all of Chicago, which is hard to do in 2951 words” (Hemingway, “The Art of the Short Story” 11). Capitalizing on the story’s omissions, film critics of the 1946 film adaptation reinterpret the story and find that the film adaptation complements the story. This tendency is not surprising since the film is often thought to bring the story to life. This approach is exemplified by film critic Philip Booth’s comments on the three film versions of Hemingway’s story: “The emotional impact on viewers of all three movie adaptations of “The Killers” matches the effect the original story has on readers. … It is a familiar theme [existential horror in a godless

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56 Lamb describes “The Killers” as a story that begins in media res that is confusing because there is no exposition involving Nick at the beginning and only two explanatory statements late in the story involving the killing of the Swede and the Swede’s vague admission of guilt (142).

57 Hoffman’s focus on the idea of nothingness (nada) and the connection of this idea to that of death as well as to the irrational and unexpected is exacerbated by this story’s misunderstandings and omissions (Hoffman173-174). These omissions are seen to challenge the reader as much as the “textual perplexities,” of which the main one is, according to Brenner, that “… the story’s major discrepancy hinges upon Nick’s perplexity at discovering that Ole Andreson, a man who has made his living as a fighter, will simply no longer fight” (Brenner 159).
universe] of Hemingway’s work and of modernism, this time elegantly, pointedly, and dramatically brought to life on film” (411).

**ERNEST HEMINGWAY’S THE KILLERS: SUMMARY AND CRITIQUE**

Siodmak’s *The Killers* reproduces the material and dialogue almost verbatim from Hemingway’s story in the diner scene that opens the film. Although the film’s two opening scenes, often called ‘the adaptation,’ sit in opposition to the rest of the film’s expanded narrative, referred to as ‘the extension,’ the smooth suturing of these parts contains gaps that are more noticeable when they are ‘read’ in light of the short story. Nevertheless, these film scenes contain elements that connect the dialogue in the diner to its cinematic expansion, like the scene showing the assassination of the Swede that, by ending the ‘adaptation,’ acts like a bridge and provides the motivation for the film’s expanded story. The film opens with a dramatic chiaroscuro rendering of the two killers approaching a town called Brentwood, New Jersey, accompanied by a pounding musical score that becomes *The Killers*’s theme as the credits roll over an expressionistically lit town scene that shows them as a pair of slowly moving and menacing silhouettes, looking for the Swede at a gas station and then moving on to the diner.

The music accompanying the killers and the mood rendered by the expressionist chiaroscuro lighting occurs here, and at other key moments throughout the film, as a musical leitmotif that anticipates their arrival and actions. Nick Adams appears seated in the film’s diner and is later revealed to be both the Swede’s co-worker at the small-town garage and a witness to the Swede’s refusal to escape his fate. He never returns to the diner after the killing and disappears forever shortly after his flashback testimony, and unlike in the short story, he is a
marginal character. The chiaroscuro images of the arrival of the killers and the assassination of the Swede frame the opening scenes in darkness and thus further embed the ‘adaptation’ segment in the film’s extended investigative inquiry, led by the detective figure, Reardon (Edmond O’Brien), an insurance agent investigating the claim on the Swede’s policy. This inquiry unfolds in a series of nonchronological flashbacks, a form that film critic R. Burton Palmer suggests is due to the influence of *Citizen Kane* and *Murder, My Sweet* on Siodmak. Palmer says “… like *Murder, My Sweet*, the film version of ‘The Killers’ follows an investigative model in which this story, in all its details, emerges only unchronologically, in bits and pieces of the truth that constitute the serial flashback narratives of a gallery of informants” (275).

The flashbacks tell the story of the Swede (Burt Lancaster), a failed boxer who becomes a criminal and does jail time for Kitty (Ava Gardner), a femme fatale who seduces him and sets him up for a double-cross after he joins a criminal gang that holds up a hat factory and steals its payroll. When Kitty and the gang’s boss, Colfax (Albert Dekker), escape with the money, the devastated Swede flees and becomes an attendant at the gas station in Brentwood. At this gas station, the Swede is discovered by Colfax, who is now Kitty’s husband and a ‘legitimate’ businessman. The Swede’s hideout is discovered, and during his routine evening visit to the diner, he realizes the consequences of his encounter with his former partner and then decides neither to escape nor fight back. A strong initial contrast is established between the everyday world of routine activities, first represented by Nick, George, and Sam at the diner, and the dark criminal underworld, represented by the killers who enter the diner and interrupt its routine. The film’s narrative transcoding of Hemingway’s story differs significantly from its literary source,
but because it prominently includes opening scenes that reproduce Hemingway’s dialogue, many critics of the film adaptation have emphasized the fidelity of the film to the short story.

Most film critics of The Killers have sought to identify how the film replicates the short story’s enigmatic qualities, but others have either avoided such comparisons or analyzed each work in its own medium. Commenting on Hemingway’s fondness for this film adaptation, film critic Delphine Letort finds in the visual dissonances of this film noir—its expressionist lighting—the enigmatically suggestive qualities of the short story: “As a German expressionist inspired film artist, Robert Siodmak managed to translate the elliptical writing of Hemingway into a picture that did not betray the tension contained in the original, enigmatic story, which could account for the writer’s attachment to the film …” (54). Her position sums up the connections between the film adaptation and the short story by critics who focus on their similarities and highlight the expressionism of film noir to stress the equal artistic merits of short story and film adaptation. In general, comparatist film adaptation critics such as Foster Hirsch suggest that the film is a successful completion or extension of the short story and that the film’s main character, the Swede, is the victimized, homeless, and communityless “non-heroic” noir hero who shares these features with the existential Hemingway hero (Porfirio, “No Way Out” 84-85). A few critics have shunned the one-to-one comparison, opting instead for either a dialogical analysis of the film that takes into account the configurations of the numerous discourses that shaped it or explicitly refusing the comparative, given the radical differences between the film adaptation and its source text.

58 In his 1981 overview of film noir, Hirsch—also a critic who reads the death of the Swede from the film back into the story—declares The Killers “… an intelligent expansion of Hemingway’s story …” (72).
Critic Thomas Leitch writes that, “In deciding to supplement Hemingway’s story to feature length, Hellinger curtailed its suggestive power …” intimating that the film defangs Hemingway’s story (38). His analysis minimizes the literary and underlines the important role of the nonliterary elements that contribute more extensively to the film adaptation than to Hemingway’s story. The overwhelming presence of these elements in the film undermines, for Leitch, the very idea of a discussion based only on comparisons to the original source. In contrast, and reinstating the importance of the literary and a larger field of influences, film critic R. Burton Palmer’s writing on the sociological dimensions of film adaptation studies leads to the proposal, for film noir and for The Killers in particular, that there are variety of discourses involved in the production of these types of films (265-266). From this perspective, noir films have narrative complexity and disruptive values that challenge the classic Hollywood framework, including a vision of the underworld as a perpetual shadow of the everyday and a refusal of social conservativism and middle-class values. These features can be seen as interruptions in the context of classic Hollywood cinema and thus as occasions for spectator/viewer participation.

Harris’s analysis of the film adaptation and its title as well as his critique of comparatist approaches to film and short story signal moments where the film reflects on itself. He presents three key moments of self-reflexivity in The Killers and arrives at a convergence with Hemingway’s story by a medium-specific analysis of the film adaptation followed by a dialogic presentation of the relationship of the film and the story (Harris 87). The film’s mise-en-scène of the hat factory robbery is, for Harris, the first self-reflexive moment. The story of the robbery is read aloud from a newspaper article by insurance investigator Reardon’s boss, whose voice leads into a filmic representation of the event in parallel with the voiceover narration, a musical
score, and no ambient sounds. Harris notices a mismatch between the voiceover spoken text about the heist and its cinematic visual representation. In addition to the increased amount of information in the film’s quasi-documentary reenactment, the visual images contradict the words being spoken. Harris suggests that this mismatch both disrupts the film’s illusionism and points to other similar and important mismatches between Hemingway’s written text and the film adaptation.

Harris discusses two other filmic moments that trigger reflection during the framing opening and closing scenes of the ‘adaptation’ segment. In the film’s first scene, prior to the encounter in the diner, the spectator/viewer is positioned in the back seat of the killers’ car, at night and in motion, looking through the windshield at the road, which is illuminated by the car’s headlights. This position establishes an immediate parallel with the eyes of the spectator watching the film in a movie theatre, which prompts the awareness of being a film spectator. Cinematic artifice is again self-reflexively foregrounded in the last of the opening shots, as the killers assassinate the Swede: the lighting used to show their firing weapons is reminiscent, for Harris, of the cinematic flicker (87). He reminds the reader that the critical distance occasioned by these three self-reflexive moments is brought about by the mobilization of medium-specific visual devices thereby also implying the need for a medium specific analysis to the foreground artifice in the short story. Having analyzed the significance of death in the short story and in Hemingway’s writing, Harris suggests a convergence between the film adaptation and the short story by a discussion of their portrayals of death, which differ in plot but are similar in spirit.

For Harris, the conclusion of the short story confronts the reader with the terrifying idea that there is no ending. In the film, he discovers contrapuntal moments or gaps that undermine the film’s explanations for the Swede’s passive attitude toward death. These gaps in the film’s
narrative point to places where the film echoes the short story’s depiction of the hollow confrontation with death. The frightening emptiness in the film is represented visually by the image of the Swede looking at the wall, which alternates with images of the door behind which the killers stand, which are taken from the camera’s point of view. These images generate moments that feel like slow alternating pauses by the spectator—moments of arrest that are described by Harris as resonant with the short story’s ending in which nothing happens. Reardon, the investigator, attempts to close these moments of pause and puzzlement by explaining them away. According to Harris, these gaps prompt the viewer to imagine alternative outcomes for the story. The spectator is made to understand that, for the investigator, life in the film continues unchanged.

THE DIALOGUE IN THE LUNCHROOM/DINER

An exploration of the cinematic rendition of the film’s dialogue in a small-town diner—the core of the short story and its replication in the film—echoes this short story’s well-known compact form in three ways. The first involves thinking about the settings that frame the film and the story; the second deals with visual depictions of the killers in the story and in the film; and the third contemplates the visual rendition of the verbal exchanges between the characters. The film’s diner scene is framed by the chiaroscuro atmosphere that precedes it and permeates and unifies the film’s melodramatic episodes. In contrast, the lunchroom of the story is presented as an enclosed, quasi-protected world that is suddenly and momentarily violated. Practically no external context frames the story’s lunchroom scene. In contrast, in the film Hemingway’s dialogue takes place in a diner and is embedded in the noir atmosphere of the entire film. Like the terror experienced in the story’s lunchroom scenes, the noir context surrounding the film’s diner scene brings similar feelings of terror into this space for workers, customers and spectators.
Fear in the film, however, is literally brought into the film’s diner as is shown on the faces of the victims who think they will be killed because they know—as the counterman affirms at the end of the diner scene—that this kind of violence is an integral part of the social fabric. The typical film noir images that foreshadow the violent disruption include a car speeding down a road on a very dark night that contrasts eerily with the car’s bright headlights, or the dark town square lit only by a few lampposts. The impact of this dark noir iconography is augmented by the looks of the killers: they are dressed like gangsters and walk in formations that suggest they are about to commit a criminal act.

The dialogue in the short story begins with the opening of the door and the entry of two characters who are depicted as strange and unlike the other characters in the lunchroom. What the killers bring into the room is based exclusively on the perplexities caused by their arrival, their looks, their behavior, and the way they talk. The already secluded world of the town symbolized by the lunchroom is, like the short story itself, made to feel more tensely enclosed by the arrival of the two threatening outsiders. Many uncertainties or perplexities underlie the irony and tension in the short story, such as the patrons’ uncertainty as to whether the killers are assassins or a vaudeville team and the killers’ unsuccessful attempt to order dinner. The confusions accumulate and end in a perplexing circumstance: the expectation that the murder will occur as stated and the fact that the reader is left with the sense that it might not occur at all.

In contrast, the killers in the film look like typical gangsters; they appear clever but are one-sided. Their literal and menacing depictions call attention to the more complex picturing of the story’s killers, whose threat stems in part from never being sure of what or who they really are. The killers in the short story are given double identities: they are first said to be like twins
and then are described equally as evil and clown-like. The coexistence of contrasting features makes Hemingway’s characters ironic, a quality that is absent in the film. Hemingway’s killers wear derby hats, which lends them both comical and threatening dimensions: although 1920s outlaws wore derby hats, so did clowns and film comedians like Charlie Chaplin. Even though the noir world gangsters of the film wear their fedoras slanted and the investigator wears his straight, the fedora signals that the killers are literally threatening bullies. The characterization of the gangsters in the story and the film also differs in the description of their weapons. In the story, the killers’ guns are portrayed by the narrator as bulges that protrude from tight overcoats, a depiction that is both fearsome and ridiculous. The gangsters in the film do not wear tight overcoats, and their possession of guns is signaled either by a gesture or by simply showing the gun. In the first case, the killer’s hand reaches inside his coat to confirm the presence of the weapon; in the second case, the gun is seen pointed at George in the diner. Hence, the gangsters’ gestures are consistent with the fact that, in the film, an assassination takes place. The fear generated by uncertainty during the dialogue in the lunchroom is conveyed in the film adaptation by the incorporation of the frightening underworld elements that frame the dialogue in the diner and by a straightforward visual and gestural depiction of the killers that ensures the verisimilar tension that will culminate in the scene of the Swede’s assassination.

The last of the divergences between the story and the film centers on the representation of verbal exchanges. In the short story, the dialogue is necessarily linear, proceeding from one speaker to the next and is more developmental and less pictorial. In the film, it is expected that the dialogue scene, presented spatially in shots in which two to four characters are seen and heard in verbal interaction, would condense the dialogue scene. However, the more condensed representation of the scene is that of the short story, with its fast-paced alternation of call and
response in short phrases full of deliberate omissions. The film adaptation frames its shots of the dialogue scene with two to four characters talking, a configuration that inevitably slows down the pace of the dialogue. However, it also makes possible the portrayal of an exchange of looks and gestures that make the dialogue’s meaning more immediate. Compactness is lost in the film’s diner scene, but the tense atmosphere of the story’s dialogue is heightened in its reproduction in the film by the characters’ positioning, gesturing, and exchanged looks as well as the tones of their voices. The longest filmed dialogue sequence is a two-minute take in which George is positioned as a hostage behind the counter between the two killers. One of the killers, who is unnamed but is later called Max, faces George and talks to him as well as to his accomplice, Al, who is holding the two other hostages in the kitchen. At times, Al opens the window to the kitchen, a gesture that makes George visible between the two killers. At other times, when Al is heard but not seen, George stands between the other killer and Al’s gun, which is pointed at his back. Many of the key moments of the film’s dialogue take place during this scene, including the admission that the killers are there to kill the Swede. A quicker tempo using the cinematic shot/reverse shot to represent the verbal exchanges sounds more like the pacing evoked by the tempo of the short story. The shot/reverse shot pattern is less compact although it more tensely represents the scene by its focus on exchanged looks and gestures, as well as the tones of voice and the reactions to changing tonalities. What is lost when compared to the short story’s dialogue is a rich variety of inferred meanings.

The more complex racial depiction of Sam in the short story is also lost in the film adaptation; although the image of a racialized Sam is present in the film, his presence is no longer made explicit in language. Instead, it is visible in the way he is stereotyped physically in the film, heard in what he says, and suggested in a pause that refers to him, all of which is more
damaging and one-sided than his depiction in the story. Sam appears earlier in the dialogue of
the film than that of the story. He is first seen obliquely through the kitchen window, cooking
and wearing a very white chef’s hat and apron that contrast with his dark skin as he responds to
George’s food orders. He appears again when asked to come into the diner and, when the killers
have left, he is seen with Nick as they are both untied and ungagged by George in the kitchen.
Sam, in the film, is dark, heavy set, looks servile, and acts visibly scared and confused. What he
says generally reflects stereotypical and negative portraiture of African Americans in 1940s and
1950s Hollywood films: as a diminished figure he is very visible; as a character he has no
individual presence and is portrayed paternalistically. Once the killers have left, George pats the
untied and ungagged Sam on the shoulder as if reassuring a scared child whereas, on the other
hand, Nick, who is an adolescent, is not comforted and is instead shown to be engaged and
proactive. Although he is never called “nigger” in the film, this naming or insult is implied when
Al is talking to George and his partner, Max, about what they will do with Nick and Sam toward
the end of the film scene. Al responds, “What’re we going to do about bright boy and ...” (The
Killers). The refusal to call Sam by his name, or by the term nigger, as in the story, and the
length of the pause that refers to him more powerfully suggests—for the characters and the
spectator of the film—the unspoken insult. The sexual and homosexual insults in the short story
could not appear in the film because of the Hays Code, but this code refers to African Americans
only when it prohibits the portrayal of interracial relationships, which begs the question of why
the insult was silently evoked. The adaptation freely and repeatedly uses the story’s insult
“bright boy” to demean Nick and George; however, Sam is addressed directly only one time and
is clearly not man enough to be called “bright boy.”
Hemingway’s story is sexist, homophobic, and explicitly racial: Sam is often called the “nigger” by the killers and the narrator. Otherwise, when his name is pronounced, he is called either Sam the cook or Sam the “nigger,” and is only called Sam once by George, when he is asked to come out of the kitchen. However, as Toni Morrison has suggested in her discussion of the “Africanist presence” in Hemingway’s fiction, Sam is also depicted as saying “extraordinary things.” She says, “Sam, the black man in “The Killers,” tells Nick that “‘little boys always know what they want to do,’” scorning and dismissing what Nick takes on as his responsibility, commenting with derision on Nick’s manhood” (Morrison 82-83). In contrast, when Sam speaks in the film, his words do not criticize anyone and mostly convey that he doesn’t want to have any part of what is going on. The visual and aural representation of this character in the film invites a revisiting of the more complex depiction of the character in the short story and exemplifies the compact force of the short story that is lost in the film’s literalism.

JUXTAPOSITIONS AND FLASHBACKS

The bewildering circumstances that abound in Hemingway’s dialogue find some expression in the film adaptation’s dialogue but are found more forcefully in the film’s puzzling narrative structure. The film as a whole appears as the juxtaposition of opening scenes, which include the reproduction of Hemingway’s dialogue (‘the adaptation’) and a melodramatic extension stemming from these opening scenes (‘the extension’). The extension is then told in either ten or eleven flashbacks (as we will see, one of the scenes may or may not qualify as a flashback) that are juxtaposed with the film’s ‘present tense’ scenes. This flashback structure contributes to the film’s narrative complexity; the non-chronological juxtaposition of story segments offers opportunities to pause and reflect when questions are raised about how the film incorporates and cinematically reflects the spirit and mood of the short story. The enigmatic
nature of “The Killers,” and most of Hemingway’s short stories, is caused by an accumulation and repetition of instances of what critic Gerry Brenner calls ‘textual perplexity.’ Brenner identifies some of them in “The Killers”: a lunchroom called Henry’s but managed by George, the time on the clock that is not the actual time, the boardinghouse manager who is mistakenly taken for its owner, meal orders from the menu that are not available, etc. (159). The rising anxiety generated from such confusions hits its apex, for Brenner, in Nick’s perplexity about the Swede’s refusal to fight back (159). The experience of terror and uncertainty in the story is recast in the film as anxiety and suspense, emotions that are strongly felt in the film’s opening sequences and continue in the juxtapositions that govern the film’s narrative structure.

The film’s establishing sequence, ‘the adaptation,’ intends to solve the enigma of the Swede’s incomprehensible behavior and is structured in the form of an inquest undertaken by an insurance investigator called Reardon. The opening sequence both encapsulates the contradictions of the noir universe and creates a fissure between itself and the rest of the film. However the film’s opening sequence ultimately stands for the spirit of the film as a whole such that the ‘adaptation’ ends up in harmony with its ‘extension.’ The interweaving of the worlds of the film’s two parts already occurs in the adaptation, when the darkness of the criminal world—filmed at night—invades the diner’s interior space, which is filmed in shades of grey.

In the extended story, the juxtaposition of flashbacks with everyday scenes underscores the conflictive dimensions of these coexisting worlds. The lighting of the flashbacks tends to separate worlds that are suspected to coexist: the everyday is represented in scenes filmed in studio daylight (gas station, hotel, office, apartment rooftop, farmhouse, etc.) whereas the underworld locales are filmed in noir chiaroscuro style with low light, stark shadows, and unsettling angles (jail cell, pool hall, green cat bar, boxing, and urban scenes, etc.). When an
everyday person narrates a noir chiaroscuro-style flashback, that person is well lit and shown in a bright, familiar environment. If the narrator of the flashback is a criminal figure, the scene that gives rise to the flashback, as well as the flashback itself, is filmed in the noir style. Although some elements that connect the flashbacks to adjacent scenes smoothly suture the remembered moment to the present of the film’s narrative, the breaches between these images overpower attempts to fully integrate them into the film’s continuous narrative. One controversial scene illustrates how a spectator/viewer might become reflective. Most critics call this long sequence— the visual reenactment of the heist at the hat factory—a flashback, but Harris views the mismatch between the verbal narration and the visual depiction as a critical commentary on adaptation.

For Harris, the sequence’s speech and image are split and detached from the narrator: “… we might begin to read this scene as a type of page-to-screen adaptation, one that foregrounds the problematics of representation by making a self-reflexive statement about the nature of textual and filmic media and the relationship between them” (75). In this sequence, Reardon attempts to convince his boss that he is about to solve the film’s central enigma by asking him to read the newspaper article. A dissolve takes us to the scene of the heist, which is accompanied by the boss’s voiceover reading of the article. Harris distinguishes this sequence from traditional flashbacks that are defined as a past remembered and narrated by characters who saw and/or participated in the narrated events. The voiceover scene does not match the heist, which is nevertheless presented as a remembered past event (75). Harris points to the contradictions in this sequence that allow us to see it as an “allegory of adaptation” and a critique of representation. The film’s images provide many details that are not in the newspaper report, and the lack of synchronization between sound and image problematizes the truth of the
documentary; the events in the film contradict the voiceover. The mismatched relationship between image and text in the film’s documentary sequence, which is presented like a flashback, calls into account fixed ideas about documentary truth (76). The flashback structure of this film, the ambiguity of the relationship of the film’s initial segment with its extension, the various contradictions in the connections between the flashbacks and their framing shots, and the mismatches in the controversial flashback generate moments of interruption and self-reflection that resonate with the enigmatic effects of the short story’s omissions and compact intensity.

Siodmak’s choice not to incorporate Hemingway’s use of the photograph and the movies as metaphors helps to spark a dialogue between film and short story. The film adaptation omits references to the photograph on two occasions. The first involves an image showing the front-page story of the hat factory heist in a local newspaper, a close-up shot that makes visible the fact that a section of this page has been cut out. A photograph would likely have accompanied such a huge crime story, and the absence of this photograph points loudly and paradoxically to its presence. Showing a photograph of the hat factory heist would allude to the hidden photographic basis of the film in a very obvious way, since such a photograph would be juxtaposed to the filmic narrative of the event that follows the reading. While its absence is, perhaps unconsciously, part of the need for the film to maintain its illusion, its imagined presence can be seen as an anti-illusionist moment. The film also omits a reference to the photographic during the dialogue with the killers in the lunchroom. As noted earlier, in Hemingway’s story, the narrator alludes to the gestures of one of the killers by saying that “He was like a photographer taking a group picture” (Hemingway, “The Killers” 283). In the film, the camera shows the same killer, Al, motioning with his gun to tell George to position himself
such that he is in front of the window to the kitchen, the gun pointed at his back. The killer in the film acts like a photographer (or a filmmaker), who organizes a scene, but Al’s actions are not defined as photographic gestures. Paying attention to the absence of a photograph and to the omission of a reference to the photographic in the film’s almost verbatim reproduction of Hemingway’s dialogue provokes an examination of another lost reference in the film—the mention of the movies in the story when one of the killers tells George he should see them more often.

The coexistence of references to photography and the movies is provocative and unproblematic in Hemingway’s story, but the same references pose problems for films that, like The Killers, are not deliberately self-reflective. In the story, Max, who has just admitted to George that they are there to kill the Swede, is uneasy and wants to change the subject. Out of the blue, Max asks George whether or not he goes to the movies. George responds that he occasionally does, to which Max replies, “You ought to go to the movies more. The movies are fine for a bright boy like you” (283). This reference functions on at least two levels: First, the killers act like the real thing and use the movies to insult George, who is, to them, childish and unmanly and lives in the world of pretend. Second, the reference to the movies serves as a mirror to the surreal events in the diner, which are described as on the cusp of the real and the spectacular.

The filmmakers’ decision to omit the references to the photographic and to the cinematic are most likely due to their potential to disrupt the cinematic illusion. Whereas the references to photography and the movies in the short story are deliberately reflexive, the omission of these references in the film are meant to avoid reflexivity in order to maintain a seamless illusionism. However, one moment in the film, which can be made visible by stilling
it, explicitly and photographically depicts the act of filming. During the reenactment of the hat factory heist, a cameraman and an assistant are momentarily visible in the windshield of the truck that serves as a shield for the robbers, a moment that is only visible to the viewer because the film can be digitally slowed down and replayed. It would have been no problem for the filmmakers to erase this moment, and perhaps they felt that it would never be visible enough to cause a problem for the film’s spectator. There can be no direct answer to this question, but a DVD can allow the viewer to grasp this image and discover another contradiction that can perhaps shed new light on the film.

MICHELANGELO ANTONIONI’S BLOW-UP

Michelangelo Antonioni credits Julio Cortázar’s 1958 short story, “Las babas del diablo” [“Blow-Up”], as the inspiration for his 1966 film Blow-Up. Despite the critical debate about the convergences—possible or impossible—of film adaptation and short story, critics agree that both works prompt interrogations about the artistic and critical potential of their respective media that disrupt habitual ways of seeing and reading. Cortázar’s correspondence at the time of the negotiations for the use of his short story indicate that Antonioni read the story in its first Italian publication in the early 1960s. Cortázar’s letters reveal a difficult negotiation, given the many owners of copyrights for his story as well as Cortázar’s puzzlement as to why the story would make a good film. He also inquired eagerly about his compensation; he hoped to earn enough to concentrate on his writing and spend less time translating for Unesco. In his

59 An inquiry in November 2015 about the publication of Cortázar’s story in Italian at the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale in Rome revealed that they were 99 percent sure that the first Italian edition of Cortázar’s stories—Las armas secretas—was published by Rizzoli in 1963.
letters, Cortázar relates the process leading to his signing a contract and writes about film with a mild disdain concerning its commercialism and irony about the fact that Antonioni would be intrigued by the themes in “Las babas del diablo.” Antonioni, who is more forthcoming about the story’s potential for his film, declares in an interview with Aldo Tassone: “I read Cortázar’s story, I liked it, and I wrote a subject, adapting it to myself” (Tassone 209). In a letter dated October 8, 1965, Cortázar, now more animated about the adaptation, writes to his friend, filmmaker Manuel Antin, about a phone conversation with Antonioni, saying, “Antonioni me telefoneó … y me dijo que el cuento era la cristalización [sic] de un tema que andaba buscando desde hace cinco años” (“Antonioni called me … and told me that the story was the crystallization [sic] of a theme he had been thinking about for five years”; Cartas, 946).

Antonioni’s comments about illustration in a 1956 letter to Italo Calvino regarding his film adaptation, “Le amiche,” of Cesare Pavese’s story (“Tra donne sole”) underscore why the question of fidelity does not arise for his film adaptations. He says, “The illustrations of a literary work have an artistic value to the extent that they are not illustrative. It is the same in cinema” (“The Girlfriends: Loyalty to Pavese” 76). When based on literary works, his films are transfigurations and, in the case of Blow-Up, meditations on filmmaking. In his introduction to The Architecture of Vision, critic Giorgio Tinazzi qualifies Blow-Up as the film “… where the image representation becomes the film’s only object of investigation …” and notes that Antonioni’s films, in general, are meditations on the complex issues of the visual (xxv).

Antonioni and Cortázar were contemporaries who were both concerned with questions of art,

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60 See Cortázar’s 1965/1966 letters to friends, editor, and translator for his apprehensions about the adaptation and the difficulties in finalizing a contract. One letter stands out: On July 3, 1967, Cortázar writes to Mario Vargas Llosa responding to Vargas Llosa’s review of the film. He informs him that he saw it twice, that he was unimpressed, but that he admires the cinematographic genius of Antonioni and the film sequence involving the development and enlargement of the photographs. Ultimately, he reports that he recognized the spirit of his story in only a few instants of the film (Cortázar, Cartas 1167).
reality, and representation and were formally innovative in their respective media. Quoted in a catalogue for a 1980 exhibition on Antonioni, *Les images d’Antonioni*, an excerpt of what Roland Barthes says in a well-known letter to Antonioni and to all artists can be applied to Cortázar:

… you labor to make subtle the meaning of what man says, tells, sees, or feels, and this subtlety of meaning, this conviction that meaning does not crudely end at the thing said, but keeps on going, fascinated by what is not meaning—such syncope is characteristic, I believe of all artists whose objective is not any specific technique but rather that strange phenomenon: vibration. The object represented vibrates, to the detriment of dogma. (Barthes, “Dear Antonioni” n pag.)

The ambiguities and open-endedness of this short story and the film have generated a large body of literary and film criticism, but each work has rarely been discussed in light of the other.61 One film critic, Murray Pomerance, alludes to the film hero’s impossible quest to find a way to tell the story, an insight about the difficulties of telling that is at the heart of Cortázar’s story as well. He says, “Of all of Antonioni’s films, this [Blow-Up] is the most equivocal, the film, in truth, without a beginning, even though it has two beginnings. The film in which everything is happening is also an impression happening, the film with a protagonist who can never be certain how this has to be told” (Pomerance 256). This exploration of Antonioni’s film adaptation of Cortázar’s short story will read and view these works dialogically and intermedially. Viewing the film while simultaneously reading the short story emphasizes and

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61 Critic David I. Grossvogel describes this oversight: “... most clues to Antonioni’s movie were not to be found under the hero’s magnifying glass but within the pages of the Argentine writer” (49).
accentuates certain formal aspects of the story that, in turn, place closer attention on its visuality.

SUMMARIES OF FILM AND SHORT STORY

The film begins with credits in large transparent letters in the spaces of which we see snippets of moving images of fashion photography shoots with a backdrop of green park grass. The film’s story takes place in London and opens with parallel stories: a professional photographer disguised as a bum, unnamed in the film but known as Thomas in the script, spends the night in a house for the poor and surreptitiously takes photographs of them for an upcoming photobook. Just before the viewer encounters Thomas, a group of costumed student revelers ride through uninhabited cityscapes at dawn. In the next scene, these students cross paths with an undisguised Thomas, who is driving a luxury car. The students accost Thomas, who is on his way to a fashion photo shoot in his studio, and ask him for money. Later that same morning, Thomas wanders into a park, prompted by the idea of taking a set of different—and what he imagines are less tragic—photographs for his book, when he discovers a couple in the park and decides to photograph them. The young woman (known as Jane in the script) spots Thomas and angrily demands his roll of film, but Thomas refuses. He returns to his studio only to discover that Jane has followed him. She insists again on the film, and he gives her a fake roll. Intrigued, Thomas develops the film and makes large prints that he hangs on the wooden beams and walls of his studio. He blows up images and segments of the images to construct a narrative based on their sequential order. He eventually sees the figure of a man with a gun hiding in the bushes and is persuaded that he has prevented a murder.
After a romp with two teenage would-be models, Thomas takes a fresh look at the photos, re-photographs an enigmatic fragment of one of the images, and finds what looks like a corpse. He returns to the park at night without his camera and finds the corpse. Upon returning to his studio, he realizes that it has been raided, that his images are gone, save one very grainy image that is too abstract to serve as evidence. When he returns to the place of the crime at dawn, the corpse is gone. Twenty-four hours from the film’s beginning, he meets the students in the park, who arrive and mime a tennis match without balls or rackets—a match we see without sound. When he is asked by the students to fetch the imaginary ball that flew out of the court, he picks it up and decides to join the game. His gesture triggers the sounds of a tennis game, which is now heard but not seen. The film ends with the progressive disappearance of the photographer, absorbed by the green grass background of the park, leaving the viewer with a full screen of green on which “The End” is inscribed in white opaque letters.

Antonioni is wary of the inevitable impoverishment resulting from verbal summaries of his films but is forthcoming, in a 1967 interview for Playboy, when asked to comment on them. He says that “… a film you can explain with words is not a real film” to indicate that a verbal summary is somewhat of a betrayal (Antonioni, “A Propos of Eroticism” 149). However, he ventures to sum up the essence of the film in an interview with Playboy, stressing that Blow-Up is unlike his prior films, which dealt primarily with human beings in relationships. In the same interview, he says,

Here the relationship is between an individual and reality—those things we see around him. … The experience of the protagonist is not a sentimental nor an amorous one but, rather, one regarding his relationship with the world, with the things he finds in front of him. He is a photographer. One day he photographs
two people in a park, an element of reality that appears real. And it is. But reality has a quality of freedom that is hard to explain. (149)

The difficulties arising from Antonioni’s attempts to represent life in motion in newly perceptible ways are thematically embodied in his enigmatic films. Similar concerns about representation are present in Cortázar’s theory of the short story and in his stories that, when summarized, also lose significant impact.

Cortázar’s short story “Las babas del diablo” [“Blow-Up”] is perhaps even more challenging to summarize. The main protagonist, Roberto Michel, narrates the story in three segments: the first is a meditation on the impossibility of capturing an event he experienced in writing; the story manifestly takes place after its narrator-protagonist has been traumatized by events not yet fully known by the reader. From the start, the reader is given strange clues about the unexplained event that has left Michel unable to write about what he witnessed, reflecting the writer’s struggle with a resistant reality. Michel is Chilean and French, lives in Paris, and is both a translator and an amateur photographer. In the second segment, he (re)tells an event that happened when he was out on a walk taking photographs on the banks of the Seine, ending up at one of his favorite squares on the Ile Saint Louis. There he spies a couple that he believes to be involved in a seductive encounter. He is drawn to them by imagining tensions in a strange tryst and by his anxious awareness of his position as a voyeur. He speculates at length about what is happening, and notices a nearby car in which he sees a man reading a newspaper. In view of the overwhelming multitude of stories he could imagine while observing this scene, he opts for taking a photograph, hoping that it “… would reconstitute things to their true stupidity” (Cortázar, “Blow-Up” 107). Intent on capturing the scene with the neutral or non-affective
camera eye, he nevertheless decides on a frame that deliberately leaves out the car and includes a tree, a detail that becomes visible when the film negative is developed.

Upon noticing that Michel has taken a photograph, the woman/seductress accuses him of illegally photographing her and demands the film. During this exchange, the reader is told that the boy has managed to escape. Michel refuses her request and casually, almost mockingly, walks away from the island. The third segment, like the first, takes place in Michel’s room. He develops the roll of film, comments on the excellent pictures taken on the walk, but tells the reader that the only photograph that interests him is that of the couple in the square. Since the negative is sharp, he decides to enlarge the image and then prints it to the size of a poster that he pins to the wall facing his work desk. In passing, he compares it to a movie screen in a foreshadowing of what will happen. As he works on his technical translation, his attention is increasingly drawn to the photographic poster, making it progressively more difficult for him to seamlessly translate from Spanish to French.

He perceives the rustling of the leaves on the tree in the enlarged photograph, and the figures in the frame start to move, making it impossible for him to continue translating. He ends a sentence in media res and eventually stops working altogether as his typewriter falls to the floor. Michel screams, feeling as if he is entering the reality of the photograph when he sees the man in the grey hat—who was excluded from the photograph—enter the frame in anger. Michel then realizes that the event was actually engineered to entrap the boy for the homosexual man who was in the car. He had been described earlier, with much more detail, as a hideous monster with a face containing both moving and still features. But now that his intent is clear, he is described in all his arrogance. With deep-set, skull-like black holes for eyes and a wagging black tongue, the man moves threateningly toward Michel who, the reader is told, has been
looking at the enlarged photograph from the point of view of the camera lens as well as with his own eyes (Cortázar, “Blow-Up” 114). The man’s hideous body occludes the lens and causes the narrator protagonist to cry and close his eyes. The event ends in the depths of the lens’s black hole, without resolution. The story sends the reader back to its beginning in what feels like endless Möbius strip-like motion.

SPATIAL CONFIGURATIONS

In drawing attention to representation, the photographic—as metaphor in both film and short story—foregrounds an awareness of scale and spatial construction. In the film, the visual organization of space and its relationship to the temporal encourage the reader of the source text to reread it in order to grasp how the text uses the spatial and how its spatial organization highlights the story’s aesthetic and formal aspects. The filmic representation of London is at the center of Blow-Up and points to the centrality of place in Antonioni’s films. Quoted by Tinazzi, he says, “The subject of my films is always born of a landscape, of a site, of a place I want to explore” (xxi). Antonioni inverts the actual scale in the relationship between the city and the park (the scene of the crime). He highlights and expands the park, and the filmed city is presented to the viewer as an extremely condensed version of the actual city. An explanation of how Antonioni reconfigured the city appears in the commentaries of film critics who have stressed that the actual distances between places in the city are much greater than their filmic representation, and these distances are experienced primarily by the viewer when protagonists drive from one place to the next.62 The compact representation of the city affects the scale of London’s Maryon Park, which is at the center of the film’s events and which, in contrast to the

62 For example, critic Murray Pomerance calls these contractions of space in the film “spatial ellipses” and states that the reductions in travel time in the film are necessary for the unfolding intensification of the drama (264).
reduced city, is viewed as a more expansive place than it actually is. When the scene in the park reappears in the film in the form of enlarged photographic prints on the walls of the photographer’s studio, the film camera focuses on them in ways that also expand the dimensions of the park by allowing them, off and on, to occupy the entire film screen.

Antonioni’s representation of the city and its park recalls a similar relationship between a city and a park in Cortázar’s short story, which takes place in Paris. The narrator-protagonist leaves his studio to walk, camera in hand, to a favorite small and intimate square located on the Ile Saint Louis that, albeit with a different import, expands in the unfolding of the last section of the story. Like the relationship in scale of city and park in Blow-Up, the small Parisian square is foregrounded by its enlargement: this small space, presented as a magnified detail, is the main space in which the short story takes place. Unlike the condensed London of Blow-Up, Paris is simply a blurred but existing backdrop for one of its islands and Michel’s studio. Even though the island is part of Paris, in the story it exists uniquely and separately as an isolated place surrounded by water. What Michel witnesses is presented as a foregrounded detail, a circumscribed scene in which features and human figures are meticulously described as if he is taking close-up shots. The scene recalls close-up photography in which the background tends to be blurred because the lens is focused on a particular detail. The city is a pervasive and blurred background, lacking description such that, in the retelling of the story’s events, the threatened boy manages to escape back into the city where it is assumed that he can run away, get lost, and become safely invisible. Similarly, and shortly thereafter, Michel walks away from the island and back into the city, knowing no one will pursue him for his film. The isolation of the square on the Ile Saint Louis, accessible only by bridge, and the detailed focus placed on events
occurring there make this small urban place seem larger than the city itself. Like in *Blow-Up*, our common sense notions of urban scale are inverted to dramatic effect.

In general, short stories thrive on distortions of scale, and a sharp and almost exclusive attention to detail or fragment is made to speak for the whole. The story’s photograph is blown up by Michel to a size reminiscent of a movie screen; it fantastically invades the studio by coming to life and addresses Michel such that he feels dragged into its unfolding. Subsequently, the image of the event in the square intrudes upon the room and the story, leaving its haunting traces when, after disintegrating into a blur, it reappears as an echo, interrupting the narration by appearing in the same photographic frame as images depicting the sky, passing clouds, rain and birds, bracketed by parentheses in the text. The foregrounding of the city square and the way that the photographic enlargement in the studio brings it back into the picture makes it come to life. It leaves traces on the wall that symbolize the story’s concentrated form and circular motion that recalls Cortázar definition of the short story. Although a linear trajectory is imparted in the telling of “Las babas del diablo,” one that traces Michel’s travel to the square and back to his room, the short story’s spatial configuration makes its reading and interpretation an essentially circular experience. The aesthetic effects of the inversions of scale in the city heighten and make more visible the spherical construction of the story and its framing.

The circular shape of Cortázar’s story is also felt as the result of an interpenetration or overlapping of interior and exterior places, a feature that is more immediately perceptible when the story is read through the prism of Antonioni’s film. Thomas, *Blow-Up*’s photographer, moves alternatively in either the cinematically condensed landscape of London and/or in his labyrinthine studio. The depiction of London as an energetic city is mirrored by Thomas’s generally hyperactive movement in the studio. Furthermore, Thomas’s studio, an interior space,
is both the place he inhabits and an external, more public, workplace. During the lengthy and infamous montage sequence, the studio is almost obliterated by the photographs taken in the park as their presence gradually overwhelms the space. The images pinned up on beams and walls that encircle the inquisitive Thomas constitute a series of shots that intensify the drama by both leading to the discovery of a crime and by showing how these images obsessively occupy Thomas’s mind and living space. Though committed to searching for the truth of the events in the park, in the end Thomas gives up. His returning of the tennis ball indicates his conscious willingness to play the game, which implies a decision to remain in the repetitive and illusionistic world of fashion photography, a world he attempted to escape with the publication of art photographs about London. Although the letters that announce the film and those that end it suggest, at first, a circularity similar to Thomas’s fate, they do so with a paradoxical twist that is addressed directly to the spectator. The letters of the opening credits are like windows on the world of fashion photography, whereas the letters that spell out the film’s ending are opaque and white; they negate transparency and impede any attempts to find fixed meanings in the film.

In the first pages of Cortázar’s story, the event that was seen by the narrator-protagonist in the square takes possession of his studio, bringing the Parisian square into his room. Although this is not knowable until the end of the story, the effects of this overlap of external place and interior space are felt immediately and in perplexing ways by the reader. The story begins as a meditation on the impossibility of telling a story, in which parenthetical reference to passing clouds, pigeons, or swallows are presented as graphic traces of what is left after the final metamorphosis of the enlarged photograph. These traces mark the narrator-protagonist’s anxiety about how to tell his story, echoing the overlapping of the boundaries of the square and
his room. He is narrator and protagonist, Chilean and French, translator and photographer, writes in Spanish and French, and is both dead and alive.

Several of the same trace elements of the story’s dramatic denouement also appear fleetingly and in parentheses in the second part of the story, the retelling of the actual experience on the Ile Saint Louis. Furthermore, the drama that takes place in the third part of the story, when the photograph of the tryst invades the room, finds yet another expression in statements told simultaneously in the first and third person. The presence of the end of the story in its middle section echoes the fantastic interweaving of external and internal spaces in the story’s final scene. The interruptive qualities of the traces that haunt Michel and summon him to write serve as openings to meditations on seeing, photographing, and fiction writing for both Michel and the reader. In the last segment of the story, the account of the photograph being transformed into a moving picture blurs the boundaries between inside and outside.

In the third and last part of “Las babas del diablo” [“Blow-Up”], Michel is frightened by both the appearance on the ‘screen’ of the ogre-like man in the gray hat and by his inability to intervene. As the threatening man covers the image by moving like a huge black mass toward the camera lens, Michel closes his eyes and cries in despair. Upon opening his eyes, Michel finds in his room traces of the outdoors in the form of clouds, sky, rain, birds, etc. The inversion of scale that highlights the Parisian square as the center of events in the short story and the ensuing cinematic transformation of the photographed square that blurs indoor and outdoor boundaries generate the dramatic tensions contained within this story’s circular frame. Consistent with Cortázar’s description of the powerful short story as a drop of water that, when seen under a microscope, reveals a hub of inner tensions, the framing of “Las babas del diablo” embodies this idea of a sphere full of explosive energy.
For Cortázar, short stories like this are described as spheres in which the writer, like the character Michel, must be able to experience reality as figures and situations in their resistance to attempts at being framed. The reader, in turn, is asked to experience the same creative energies of the story’s construction as a breaking of frames. The story is said to expand into the reader’s world in ways that make visible new modes of perception and awareness. If circularity is, in part, the result of Cortázar’s use of landscape and scale, it is perhaps equally present in his use of the photographic to shape the story. Borrowed in spirit by Antonioni from the opposition in Cortázar’s story of the still photograph to the written narrative, the photographic as practice and material object dominates the film by underscoring the contrasts between still photography and motion pictures.

THE PHOTOGRAPHIC

Antonioni’s film and Cortázar’s story both involve the usage of still photography as a means to affirm both the power of narrative continuity and of the self-reflexivity that results from the interruption of narrative flow. Most film and literary critics agree that this film and this story are metanarratives that center around the photographic, even though their analyses can differ significantly on these points. In her exploration of the plural uses of the photographic in Antonioni’s film, contemporary film critic Matilde Nardelli states that “Michelangelo Antonioni’s Blow-Up is still probably one of the best known films ‘about’ photography, and in which particular photographs play a prominent narrative and aesthetic part” (Nardelli 185). Concomitantly, literary critic Dan Russek comments on the centrality of the photographic in Cortázar’s work:
… Julio Cortázar’s engagement with photography plays a productive role in many of his writings and spanned most of his literary career. As a practice of image production, a metaphor, a principle of textual organization (and disruption), photography becomes a privileged site through which Cortázar articulates tensions in his work among literature, aesthetics and politics. (37-38)

For critics, the abundance of photographs in Antonioni’s film is commonly seen as a means to mobilize the interruptive power of the photograph as an anti-illusionist gesture, but the use of the photograph as photogram in the film’s montage episode shows, with equal force, how cinematic illusionism can be marshaled with critical intent. Film theorist Garrett Stewart remarks that this film is not often closely analyzed in terms of the relation of the photograph to film and begins his analysis by calling Thomas’s mental processing of the montage scene that of a detective and film director or, in Stewart’s terms, a “protocinematic manipulator of ocular gestalt” (302). Stewart analyzes the film by building on and departing from literary critic Frederick Jameson’s allegorical reading of the film, focusing on the actual and disappearing corpse of the murdered man and the body of Thomas in the movie’s final scene. Looking at the staged presence and absence of the corpse in the park in conjunction with Thomas’s disappearance into the folds of a grassy lawn, Stewart concludes that the montage scene in which the normally masked photogrammatic basis of film is revealed is an ironic statement. The evidentiary nature of the last photograph of the montage scene, in which there seems to be a body, a fact subsequently certified by the discovery of the actual corpse, is then made uncertain by its cinematic disappearance. Thus, for Stewart, cinematic illusionism trumps photography’s realist illusionism (305). Simultaneously, the cinematic manipulation that erases Thomas’s figure at the film’s conclusion makes apparent his existence as a film character, further
demonstrating the radical potential of cinematic illusionism to make the viewer aware of his/her position as a spectator.

While Antonioni’s usage of the photographic sequence in *Blow-Up* as interpreted by Stewart highlights one of the ways Antonioni radicalizes narrative filmmaking, it also prompts reflection on how Cortázar uses the photographic to intensify the circular motion of his story. He augments the reader’s sense of the spherical organization of the story by staging within its containment a frame-breaking gesture. By showing figures that move out of the frame of the poster-sized photograph and by letting an excluded one enter the image’s frame, these figures violate the limits of the frame yet remain, at the same time, within the circular dynamic of the story. The cinematic moment at which the photograph that Michel enlarges and pins to his wall comes to life can be considered both as the failure of Michel’s photograph to have captured the tense contradictory essence of the story or as the moment in which what was captured in the frame tells a story on its own, establishing in both cases the circular movement of the story. The latter interpretation underlines the fact that the story tells itself, exemplifying a feature that Cortázar attributes to powerful short stories called the story’s “autarquía,” or independence (Cortázar, “Del cuento breve” 65).

For Cortázar, this independence visually illustrates the radical and spherical separation of the story from its writer, a crucial event that ensures the story’s existence as an independent aesthetic object whose frame, now fully formed, is its most prominent and visual characteristic. Photographic mediation in “Las babas del diablo” highlights the aesthetic power of the short story’s frame by foregrounding its difficult execution. If successfully framed, the experience of reading the short story can encapsulate the intensity of the writer’s experience, contained in an artistic object so conflictive and compact that it offers the reader the energy of the original
creative experience. Hence the story’s enigmatic reading is yet another circular experience based on the creative and interpretive use of the photograph both to frame and to rupture the frame.

In “Las babas del diablo,” the narrator-protagonist dwells on the question of the photograph, explaining that, like Cortázar’s claims regarding the short story, the photograph has to capture a decisive moment, as defined by Cartier-Bresson (22), in which the event or moment frozen in time and space appears as potentially in movement. For Cortázar, the short story’s critical edge lies in a tight, often circular, framing that suggests an explanation without ever allowing it to define the story. Photographs in the film and the photograph that organizes the short story poignantly encroach upon linear narrative progress and/or circular motion to constitute multiple openings for critical reflection.

In the film, the use of photographic images, seen earlier as a radical use of cinematic illusionism, are shown to be disruptive moments via their ability to interrupt continuous movement. The artistic prints that Thomas takes at the men’s shelter and the images that appear in the dummy of his future photobook both halt the cinematic flow. While meeting in a restaurant to discuss their work on the photobook before his encounter in the park, Thomas shows his collaborator and editor, Ron, his black-and-white images of the men in the shelter. Seeing these photographs—magnified at times to full-screen size by the film camera—makes the viewer instantly and dramatically aware of their contrast with the rest of the film’s color narrative, which depict Thomas’s extravagant life and his varied and trendy photographic activities. When Thomas tells Ron that he’d like to be free from his fashion photography, Ron uses the photographic image of a derelict man to stress that Thomas’s artistic freedom is
dependent on his ability to perform his more traditional work. The normally chatty Thomas remains silent, a moment that creates a radical breach for the viewer.

The social reality and the violent underside of Thomas’s life in the film reappear when the seemingly tranquil event in the park becomes the scene of a crime. This tension between art and life manifests in Cortázar’s short story when Michel’s photograph of the tryst turns into the violent event he thought he had avoided by photographing it. In at least three instances, the reader experiences a baffling interruption as a result of Michel’s photograph. The first is the surprising idea that a photograph will resolve Michel’s attempts to create a story from the image. He speculates endlessly on the scene, generating depictions, storylines, and story endings and imagining his own involvement in the course of events. He is distressed by the numerous possibilities and uncertainties offered by the image and ascribes this distress to his own affect. He resorts to taking a photograph to quell these ambiguities, claiming the non-affective camera point of view. The idea that the photograph will clarify the situation is odd and will likely give the reader pause.

The second instance involves the inherent ambiguity of the photographic gesture. On the one hand, Michel simplifies his understanding of the event by letting the camera set the frame; on the other, he includes and excludes elements from the framing, suggesting that both he and the camera have created the image. This contradictory gesture gives the reader another moment of pause. The contradiction between what he includes in the photographic frame and the excluded elements that enter the photograph in the poster-sized enlargement constitute the third interruptive photographic moment. The threatening man in grey in the car, excluded from the photograph, comes into the frame, bringing out all Michel’s original speculations about the scene. The still photograph, taken perhaps at a decisive moment at which suggestion of
movement is forceful enough for it to come alive, challenges the story’s narrator-protagonist to match its visual sentience and ambiguity in the verbal narrative. Questions about the difficult seizure and artistic rendition of life events, which Antonioni calls reality’s freedom or resistance to capture, are at the center of Blow-Up and of “Las babas del diablo.” Photographic representations of the real interrupt the temporal development of events in ways that generate, for the reader and the film viewer, dramatic and self-reflective experiences.

Antonioni and Cortázar share the idea that a visual image, for the first, and a story’s retold event (like the framing of a photograph), for the latter, must contain an intensity that is suggestive of meanings that demand to be sought yet are endlessly elusive. The artists differ on how to achieve such provocative and concentrated moments of ambiguity: Cortázar intensifies an event by amplifying tensions and by cleverly interweaving the verisimilar and the fantastic whereas Antonioni advocates eliminating the event after watching the development of the scene it contains, leaving the viewer to contemplate the sparse elements of the image charged by the filmmaker’s affective interpretation. In both the film and story, a moment exists in which the photographic image becomes so abstract that what it represents is no longer obvious. In the film, two photographs give evidence that a crime has been committed: the image of the man with a gun in the bushes and the image of the corpse. They take on realistic effects when seen as part of a sequence of events, effects that emerge from images that were initially abstract patterns of black and white dots. In the film, the image left behind after the theft is that of the corpse, an image that is isolated, enigmatic, abstract, and no longer clear yet full of the traces of what Thomas witnessed previously.

In Cortázar’s story, the enlarged photograph that turns into a film moment ends up looking like a dark and blurry mass that threatens its spectator. The photograph of the scene
taken by the narrator, who first witnessed it with a degree of clarity, turns into an amorphous mass, both threatening and challenging its viewer. The man whose plan was apparently thwarted by the narrator-protagonist’s photographic intervention foils Michel’s ability to capture the event by erasing the whole image. Yet, this same obliterating and indistinct mass carries a story that the narrator-protagonist must create and that the reader must interpret. Given Cortázar and Antonioni’s intent to please, confound, and question, their works in general, and *Blow-Up* and “Las babas del diablo” in particular, make exacting demands on readers and spectators, asking them to be creative participants.

**PENSIVE SPECTATOR AND READER ACCOMPLICE**

The explicitly interruptive techniques in Antonioni’s *Blow-Up*—found primarily in his foregrounding of the photographic—invite comparison with the idea of cinema’s pensive spectator and with Cortázar’s “lector cómplice” (reader as accomplice). The film’s photographs act like freeze frames, arresting its flow and making visible its illusionistic construction. The spectator is given the chance to become a self-conscious reader of the film in these moments, which open up spaces for active participation during an otherwise passive experience. With similar critical intent, Cortázar uses photography in “Las babas del diablo” to highlight the power and the difficulty of the abbreviated framing of linguistic material. More generally, the story also serves as a commentary on short story writing. The photograph, deployed to foreground the role of framing, with a focus on both its capacity for condensation and expansion, gives the story an enigmatic quality that offers openings for critical and creative participation of the kind anticipated by Cortázar in his idea of the “lector cómplice”. The
participatory demands made on the film spectator/viewer and on the reader of the short story are echoed by the active deferral of fixed meanings found in both works.

Compared to Antonioni’s other films—often dismissed as formalist and lacking in explicit meanings—*Blow-Up* was Antonioni’s most commercially successful film even though its decoding also requires the kind of pensive spectatorship necessary for his other films, a spectatorship defined at the beginning of this chapter by film critics Bellour and Mulvey. And, although Antonioni claims that he never thinks of the public when making films (Labarthe 139), the public he references is a general public that is more interested in and comfortable with conventional cinematic storytelling. Consequently, his refusal to consider the public is manifest in his eschewing conventional norms and techniques (Antonioni, “A Talk with Michelangelo Antonioni on his Work” 23), and, in an explicit rejection of the normative, he states: “I detest films that have a message” (Antonioni, “Making a Film is My Way of Life” 16). The indeterminate and perplexing beauty of this film is, according to Antonioni, that “*Blow-Up* is a film that lends itself to many interpretations because the issue behind it is precisely the appearance of reality” (Tassone 209). Antonioni believes that what is captured cinematically must offer new perceptions of reality, a position that inevitably involves an experimental cinema and a spectator open to an appreciation of how it subverts conventional cinematic narratives.

The intensely charged and empty landscape image favored by Antonioni requires a spectator and/or viewer who can become involved in its tension and will look for meanings in its indeterminateness. Two images from *Blow-Up* arrest the film’s continuity and echo Antonioni’s description of an ideal white landscape image found in his essay “The Event and The Image” (51-53). In Nice during World War II, while waiting for a visa to enter France, he
gives his account of the creation of an ideal film image. He contemplates a sea and beach landscape in various shades of whiteness that is interrupted by a tumultuous event. In contrast to the more conventional choice of focusing on the cinematic rendering of action, Antonioni finds more drama in the sparse, blank landscape that draws not from action but rather from how the abstract configurations of the landscape capture his feelings. The dynamic energy of such a landscape contains, for him, the artistic potential to motivate and challenge the spectator. In Blow-Up, Antonioni lingers for a few seconds too long on a white wall in Thomas’s studio while Thomas and Jane tensely enter the room. The close-up of the wall unexpectedly pauses the film’s rhythm. Its pregnant blankness perplexes and momentarily halts the spectator’s involvement due to its placement between moments of tense narrative development. The image lingers in the viewer’s memory until the end of the film where, once again, whiteness and opacity appear in the letters “The End.”

While discussing Antonioni’s controversy with the Chinese government about what he should or should not film, film critic John David Rhodes makes a comment about Antonioni’s style that contains implications for viewing his films and, by extension, for reading Cortázar’s stories. Rhodes writes, “… Antonioni’s cinema … was often looking at what seemed to be the wrong things” (297). Rhodes’s statement points to the creative dimension of pensive spectatorship when he adds, “… looking with the abstracting force of Antonioni’s style might help us to understand what we actually see when we look and to imagine what we would rather see in its place” (297). The reader of “Las babas del diablo” is expected to ponder the puzzling experiences formulated with uncertainty by the narrator-translator-photographer in his attempts at artistic representation, a situation that is dramatized in the story by a dark mass that momentarily and frighteningly obliterates his contemplation of the photographic image. The
narrator (and the reader) is seen to look at the ‘wrong thing’ that obliterates but that also prompts other ways of looking. As intended in Antonioni’s film, Cortázar’s story aims to be a work of art that makes the reader experience new, different, and nonconformist ways of seeing, rendered by creative experimentation with the uncertain expressed in verbal and visual configurations.

Writing about surrealist features in Cortázar’s work, literary critic Caws highlights the tensions between the text and the reader in his novel *Hopscotch* and in his short stories, underlining the demands that his writing makes on the reader. She illustrates this tension in one of Cortázar’s stories, remarking that “… the play of its *Hopscotch*’s endless paths constructed by the reader and foiled by the text has briefer parallels in his stories such as ‘Continuity of Parks,’ with its brilliant ironic placement of the armchair for reading with its back to the door, so that we shall finally be forced to sink in it as well as in its plot” (Caws 97). The readers are accomplices in Cortázar’s definition of the ideal reader in *Hopscotch*. In agreement with Antonioni, Cortázar rejects narratives that are written to transmit a message (Cortázar, *Hopscotch* 397). The “lector cómplice” is the product of an open unconventional text that, according to Cortázar, “… would not clutch the reader but which would oblige him to become an accomplice as it whispers to him underneath the conventional exposition other more esoteric directions” (396). This reader is meant to participate in the construction of meaning of the text, a dynamic that the writer creates by erasing the gap between the time of creation and the time of reading such that the reader becomes a co-creator. Cortázar contrasts an unfortunately named female reader (“lector hembra”) to his desired reader, and, in order to differentiate them, he uses the metaphor of the façade to define the literary text. The literary work is a façade behind which there is a mystery that is unlikely to be found. The “lector cómplice” searches painstakingly,
whereas the “lector hembra” happily accepts to remain at the level of the façade (398). I argue that Cortázar’s general idea of the “lector cómplice” is his ideal reader for the short story, particularly for “Las babas del diablo.”

Some critics present Cortázar’s idea of the “lector cómplice” as a dead end in which the reader is trapped within the story rather than as a principle and a strategy meant to expand the effects of the reading experience and open it to infinite reconceptualizations of the reader’s life experiences. Literary critic David Kelman prefers the former idea and places Cortázar’s theory of the short story in dialogue with Walter Benjamin’s essay on storytelling. With this comparison, Kelman shows that the effects of modern short stories such as Cortázar’s end up silencing the reader because they are seen exclusively as moments of arrest, shock, and disconnection that silence. A silenced reader contradicts what Cortázar has in mind for the “lector cómplice.” Instead of leading to silence, the violence of shock effects are meant, for Cortázar, to expose the reader to new ways of understanding the oppressive nature of everyday experience and, consequently, to foster imaginative responses to artistic, social, and political constraints. Kelman finds that Cortázar’s reader inevitably remains trapped within the experience of reading the modern short story, of which the impact is curtailed by the fact that the struggle between life and its literary representation is artificially resolved, thus making any statements about reconnection with one’s experience and the community purely utopian.

However, although the tensions between ‘real’ life and its artistic representation can be considered to be momentarily resolved by the fact of the story’s construction, this resolution is only partial. Inner tensions remain productively unresolved for the reader of Cortázar’s stories,

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63 See Kelman, “The Afterlife of Storytelling” for his full argument and questioning of the political dimension of Cortázar’s ideal reader.
which suggests that resolutions are unlikely. The story’s framing contains the tensions caused
by attempts to frame a live event, but those same tensions shatter the frame during the reading
experience. This simultaneous containment and shattering makes the reader reflect on truths
beyond the story. Readings demand re-readings, which raise endless questions about art,
writing, and experience. Stories that are powerfully enigmatic demand a reimagining of the
social and political role of art within which new literary forms emerge as forceful meditations
on the impoverishment of everyday experience. For example, in the final scene of “Las babas
del diablo,” the narrator-protagonist has become aware of his physical separation from the story
in the photograph. If the moving picture on the wall can be said to mirror Cortázar’s definition
of the construction of the short story, then the photograph of the event on the square has become
independent, a feature that is confirmed by the narrator-protagonist’s inability to intervene in its
unfolding. Like the ideal short story, the still-moving image is available to the reader who,
stunned by its effects, is unable to change the course of events yet remains highly sensitive and
inquisitive about the story’s unresolved contradictions. Peaceful images of clouds and birds,
etc., are traces of the event that are left on the screen. These traces could be seen as the release
of earlier tensions; reading “Las babas del diablo”, however, deliberately places the reader in a
position to experience, from the beginning, the same contradictions experienced by the narrator-
protagonist in his attempts to frame and write his story.

The problems and contradictions faced by Michel, a writer and photographer, are
mirrored in Cortázar’s writing about the challenges he experienced when writing a short story.
The story’s jarring juxtapositions and doublings are meant to provoke the reader to imagine
alternative ways of reading and writing by his or her awareness of tensions between the fictional
and the actual. Like the drama embodied in Antonioni’s eventless white landscapes, Cortázar’s
short stories must mysteriously embody the creative energy of the writing process, an energy pictured as abstract dark matter. It is up to the pensive spectator of the film and to the “lector cómplice” of the short story to tease out an interpretation from the myriad possibilities offered by the artwork and, perhaps more importantly, to accept the ongoing challenge of thinking more deeply about one’s life experiences in and from the encounter with the work of art.

The artistic construction of both Antonioni’s film and Cortázar’s short story incorporates a variety of features that define the filmmaker’s and the short story writer’s styles and invite the kind of self-reflexivity and critical reading that are crucial to the idea of pensive spectatorship as defined by film critics and to the idea of the reader as accomplice as defined by Cortázar. A full appreciation of both this film and this short story requires the active participation of a creative spectator/viewer and reader who is willing to embark on an interpretive journey that leads to a meditation on art and representation and, ultimately, to a re-examination of one’s habitual ways of seeing and knowing. Both works invoke failure in order to underscore the difficulties of artistic representation. Antonioni’s character Thomas fails to continue and complete his work as an artistic photographer. Through his gesture of returning the pretend tennis ball, he returns to the illusionistic world of fashion photography, a game that he knows all too well. In sum, he has given up struggling with the difficulties of artistic representation, difficulties that remain, however, as questions for the viewer. Similarly, Cortázar’s short story presents a narrator-protagonist struggling with how to construct a short story based on his experience of an event. Michel’s failure gives concrete form to Cortázar’s story, thus illustrating how the drama and the difficulties of short story writing are presented to the reader as questions that generate more questioning.
As noted at the beginning of this discussion of Antonioni’s film, I analyzed these works by putting them in a dialogue with each other to discover the different ways they approached similar concerns instead of looking at the film simply as an adaptation of the story. Antonioni found elements to develop his film through Cortázar’s story, but his use of these elements is only tangentially related to the source text. What the two works share, however, are common concerns about the relationship of art to reality, the critical use of photography to explore its power and limitations, and the idea that a work of art can provoke heightened awareness in its beholder. These two mid-twentieth century avant-garde artists explore the possibilities of radical artistic representation within a social and political milieu that is saturated by technologically and photographically generated images. Reading Cortázar’s short story in dialogue with Antonioni’s film adaptation reveals the extent to which these contemporary artworks are separate yet connected in their conjoining of the still and moving image to both reflect on the paradox of filmmaking and wrestle with how to express visual simultaneity within a verbal framing. In both cases, exacting demands are made on the spectator and the reader. The film reflects the idea of pensive spectatorship and the short story the idea of the reader as accomplice. These forms of reading and viewing address the spectator and the reader directly and invite him or her to be a co-creator of meaning. These works deploy strategies of urban spatial representation with the intent of dramatizing their reflections on tensions between artistic representation and reality. Shifts in commonsense notions of scale—small parks made big and large cities made small—highlight the circular trajectories of the main protagonists of the film and story, amplifying conformist entrapment and/or frustration.

The ambiguity of the photographic image, its evidentiary and fictional qualities, is deployed by Antonioni and Cortázar to confound characters and protagonists as well as
spectators and readers. The idea of realistic representation given by the presence and depiction of a concrete referent (corpse, tryst) is suddenly retracted by the referent’s disappearance or, in the short story, by a metamorphosis. Reading Cortázar’s short story in conjunction with Antonioni’s film adaptation sheds light on the visual aspects of the story, the spatial and the photographic, in ways that accentuate the power of its visual effects and make the short story a model of the potential for the form’s verbal experimentalism to be mobilized as an inspiration for new ways of writing short stories by creatively engaging a culture saturated with visual images.

CONCLUSION

The three short stories and their film adaptations discussed in this chapter are well known and exemplary literary and cinematic works in which rich explorations of art and experience have redefined the literary and the cinematic. Analyzing how these film adaptations use selected elements from their literary sources gives rise to a rereading of these short stories in light of the cinematic transfigurations of the same elements, a practice that makes more manifest the power of the visual in the short story in, most notably, its framing, its spatial organization, and in the fundamental role of the detail, all features that ensure the compactness of the form that is the source of its powerful impact. The close-up shot and the rhythmic edit used by Epstein in La chute de la maison Usher are cinematic devices that convey the spirit of Poe’s stories. The way such devices represent material from Poe’s stories, in turn, prompts renewed attention to the fundamental role of the visual in the same stories. Of the three films, Ernest Hemingway’s The Killers is the least experimental work but is nevertheless a classic of film noir. It is a radical transformation of Hemingway’s story that nonetheless contains an opening
segment that is an almost-verbatim reproduction of the story’s dialogue scene. The discrepancies that stem from this situation involve the juxtaposition of what is ‘faithfully’ adapted to a melodramatic development and have sparked extensive study of the consequences of the multitude of contradictions and mismatches between the two works and within the film itself. These discrepancies are, in large part, revealed by reading the film in dialogue with the short story. The filmic visualization of elements from Hemingway’s story points back to the visual power of his story. The critical force of the film’s visualizations are: the cinematic rendition of the dialogue scene, the visual effects of the juxtaposition of flashbacks with images of the film’s present tense narrative, and, finally, the film’s omission of Hemingway’s explicit references to the photographic and the filmic. The impact of the effects due to specific moments and to the film’s flashback construction create openings or gaps in the film that constitute occasions for both spectator/viewer participation and critical interpretation in a film that is mostly conventional.

Finally, Antonioni’s Blow-Up and Cortázar’s short story “Las babas del diablo” are the works of contemporary artists who are committed to a critique of conformism in literature and film. Their works address conventional art by a formal experimentalism that challenges habitual reading and viewing practices and that seeks to generate new and transformative perceptions of reality. Antonioni’s focus on spatial organization and on the photographic is echoed in reading Cortázar’s story with a focus on how these same topics delineate and highlight the importance of the visual dimensions of the short story. The avant-garde construction of this film and this short story, embodied in the metaphoric use of the photographic, requires spectators and readers who are receptive to frustration, puzzlement, and to the interpretive demands made by unresolved narratives.
An understanding of the critical power of the photographic to promote interferences and create ruptures in both film and short story emerges from a dialogic reading of these film adaptations and their short story source texts: it demonstrates the profitability of rereading these works, it urges the spectator, viewer, and reader to engage their difficulties and opacities, and it underlines the benefits of the continued exploration of the pairing of the photographic and the filmic with the short story. Therefore, to continue to reflect on the visuality of the short story and to expand the exploration of the feasibility and desirability of critical reading and pensive viewing, the next chapter returns to the short story and the photograph. A selection of stories that were not published with pictures and photographs that did not illustrate stories (and were not meant to) are juxtaposed in order to stage an intermedial dialogue between the photographs and short stories of two writers who were also photographers: a Mexican, Juan Rulfo, and a North American, Eudora Welty.
CHAPTER FOUR
TWO SHORT STORY WRITER–PHOTOGRAPHERS
Juan Rulfo and Eudora Welty

INTRODUCTION

Unlike the short stories analyzed in relation to their photographic accompaniments in the previous three chapters, the discussion of this final chapter bears on the juxtaposition of selected short stories and photographs by two writers, Juan Rulfo and Eudora Welty, who were also photographers and whose stories were not, for the most part, illustrated during their lifetimes. Rulfo kept silent about his photography and, apart from an early journal article with photographs, did not produce writings accompanied by photographs. In an effort to get her stories published, Welty sent a few early stories to a publisher along with some unrelated photographs. This 1935 project involving stories and photographs is a manuscript entitled *Black Saturday* that was never published. However, she produced an imagetext memoir, *One Writer’s Beginnings*, and wrote about photography and writing. Despite differences in their involvement with photography and in their use of the photographic in the literary, these two writers were active photographers while they were writing and both were highly reputed writers before their photographic work became public. Hence, for most critics, discussions of their photographs refer inescapably to their literary works. Another writer-photographer, perhaps known best as a writer of short stories, Julio Cortázar, provides the framework with which to approach the juxtaposition of these two writers’ short stories and photographs. The idea that a good photograph shares features with an exceptional short story—Cortázar’s proposition—provides the stimulating matrix used in this chapter to deliberately juxtapose photographs and stories in order to discover how readers and
viewers are brought in as creative participants and co-producers when and where these two media are seen to intersect.

Juan Rulfo and Eudora Welty’s short fiction provide a unique occasion to explore what the photograph and the modern short story have in common: a tense and compact form that endows them with the power to provocatively engage viewers and readers. Among writers who are also photographers, Rulfo and Welty are unique in their mastery of both arts. In his writings on the modern short story and its relationship to photography, Cortázar, also a photographer, offers categories particularly suited to highlight the exceptional qualities of both art forms and to conduct a discussion of Rulfo and Welty’s work in both media. The formless and intoxicating subject matter that presses upon the writer until the short story is written is, according to Cortázar, similar to the photograph’s ambiguous relationship to the objective reality it creatively captures, an ambiguity that also seeks words. Outstanding short stories and photographs attract and immerse readers and viewers into enclosed, tense, and uncertain worlds that puzzle and compel them to become attuned to the potential of juggling different layers of meaning at once. Finally, the short story’s detachment from its creator and the intentional or unintentional mark of the photograph’s fictional construction serve to foster openings in works of art such as Rulfo’s and Welty’s that transform readers’ and viewers’ assumptions about rigid boundaries between fiction and reality.

The openings created by the taut and elliptical construction of Rulfo’s and Welty’s short stories, as well as the estrangement effects found in certain of their photographs, exert imaginative and creative pressure on readers and viewers. On a personal level, the willing reader and viewer are led to acknowledge that irrational forces frequently determine their understanding of what happens in daily life. On the social and political level, the complacency of the reader and
viewer is disrupted by a radical confrontation with the presence of imagined ordinary worlds made unexpectedly extraordinary, worlds whose inhabitants—are, in unpredictable ways, resilient, resistant, resourceful, and, perhaps most importantly, poetic.

Examining and juxtaposing some of Rulfo’s and Welty’s photographs and selected short stories makes manifest how such aesthetically ambiguous forms of writing with light and writing with words, each on their own terms, possess the qualities and effects Cortázar finds in photography and in great short stories: a unique power to attract, to disorient, to point beyond their frames and to creatively mobilize the reader and viewer. A brief commentary on these writers’ involvement with photography and its relationship to their writing prefaces this discussion of how the interactions of both media serve to heighten the expressive power of each and, ultimately, to demonstrate the visual power of the short story.

Juan Rulfo and Eudora Welty’s photographic work share uncanny resemblances. Both writers took pictures while on jobs that required travel in and around regions in which they lived, making them somewhat itinerant photographers. Although they took photographs before and during their work as writers, writing remained the priority for Rulfo and Welty. As photographers, they were shy, a quality that is present in the unobtrusive framing and oblique nature of their images, whether of people or landscapes. Welty calls her photographs snapshots to highlight the fact that she takes what she sees and does not pose her subjects or deliberately set up her scenes. Her definition distinguishes her photographs from those of her peers, such as Walter Evans, who, according to Welty, produced photographs with a reform agenda in mind. Hence, by the snapshot, she intimates a more spontaneous image, one that leaves more room for the subject to express itself freely. The fact that Welty took photographs of people on their time off and organized the photographs in her first photobook, One Time, One Place: Mississippi in
the Depression, A Snapshot Album, in sections entitled “Workday,” “Saturday,” “Sunday,” and “Portraits,” shows her insistence on highlighting the minimally constricting aspect of her images.64

Although Welty emphasizes the snapshot nature of her photographs, she has also said that by publishing them thirty-five to forty years after they were taken has given them a certain value, attributing to them a documentary quality. Furthermore, if her photographs were not fully appreciated in the 1930s, changes in the status of photography and the discovery of how her images differ from photojournalists’ work in the same era can be seen to account for renewed interest in them. Rulfo’s photographs contain elements of the snapshot in the faces of his subjects, who, like Welty’s, resist the viewer by their interrogative or disregarding looks and gestures. Unlike Welty’s images, however, his photographs are at times intentionally part of a documentary project and they tend to be composed with more deliberate artistic intention, due, perhaps for the first, to his keen interest in history and architecture and, for the latter, to his work as a photographer on cinema sets and to his interactions with professional Mexican photographers such as Manuel Álvarez Bravo. Like the renewed attention to Welty’s photographs, contemporary interest in Rulfo’s photographs is due to the development of new and more pluralistic responses to photography and to recent studies of the interrelationships between photography and literature.

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64 Workday images show people on breaks and her portraits are of people when they are not at work, times when those depicted are on their own time.
JUAN RULFO, PHOTOGRAPHER

Since 1980, critics have compared Rulfo’s written work with the photographs he took during the 1940s and 1950s when he was also writing his short stories collected in *El llano en llamas* [The Burning Plain] and his novel, *Pedro Páramo*. A retrospective of his photographs was organized for the first time at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City in 1980. It has been suggested that Rulfo was encouraged to let the photographs be displayed even though he had not taken them with the intention of making them public and did not consider himself a professional photographer. Two publications are related to this exhibit: *Juan Rulfo Homenaje Nacional* (1980), a catalogue of the one hundred photographs on display in the museum with a collection of essays, and *Inframundo* (1983), a reprint of the same photographs and essays in a more modest format and in a slightly different arrangement. The essays in these two publications focus primarily on Rulfo’s written work (most frequently on his novel *Pedro Páramo*) for the simple reason that his photographs had not been so extensively made public before this exhibit. The *Homenaje* exhibit opened up new areas of study about Rulfo’s work, prompting essays on the photographs; discussions of the relation of the photographs to the written work; and more publications, conferences, and exhibits giving the public access to photographs previously unpublished from an archive that is said to contain over 7,000 negatives.

Most critics of Rulfo’s visual and written work would agree that they mutually influence each other. This sentiment was recently reiterated by critic Yoon Bong Seo, who, in his essay “Juan Rulfo, escritor y fotógrafo: Dos artes en conjunción,” states, “… el consenso es general, la obra rulfiana se ve influida en sus dos direcciones: del escritor al fotógrafo y del fotógrafo al escritor” (“There is general consensus about the two directions that influence Rulfo’s work: from the writer to the photographer and from the photographer to the writer”; 4). While most
commentaries on Rulfo’s photographs and writings explore how the extraordinary craftsmanship present in Rulfo’s novel, *Pedro Páramo*, is visible in his photographs by means of how he artistically captures rich and vibrating nuances of light, few writers have focused more generally on the similarities in form found in Rulfo’s photographs and his short stories. In her article, “La imagen en el discurso estético de ‘Luvina’ e *Inframundo* de Juan Rulfo,” critic Esther Raventos-Pons explores how estrangement effects work in one short story, “Luvina,” and in several photographs from *Inframundo*. Although Raventos-Pons provides valuable insights into how Rulfo’s short story and selected photographs simultaneously express the oppression of a people and their resistance to the reality that disempowers them, her essay is limited to one quality, the estrangement effect, shared by Rulfo’s short story and his photographs. Another more recent critic, Lucy Bell, chooses to comment on form in relation to Rulfo’s photographs and, most notably, to examine the formal aspect of his short stories by using a ‘photographic aesthetic’: she marshals the idea of the photographic shock to locate the ruptures in his short stories that call for reader participation (2014).

Those critics who have looked at Rulfo’s photographs and his literary work have written about them mostly in terms of thematic similarities. Undoubtedly, his images of rural Mexico, perhaps the bulk of his images, can be seen to echo Mexico’s rural landscapes and inhabitants. Focus has tended to be on common themes and subjects said to exist in both: the greatest number of critics find the mysterious and the mythical in them, often alluding to their representation of Mexico as a timeless national essence. Some have commented on similarities in composition. In spite of these numerous studies, Rulfo was silent about his photographs, reluctant to exhibit them or give them captions, and silent about their relationship to his writing, whether formative or illustrative. As critic Dan Russek points out, “There is no textual or biographical evidence that
Rulfo intentionally conceived of a link between these two media…” (15). Russek’s study deals with the one place where there is an intersection between Rulfo’s photography and literature: he examines the ekphrastic use of one photograph in Rulfo’s novel. Other recent assessments of Rulfo’s photographs reveal the breadth of his photographic work: documentary photographs often on commission, photographs taken during film shoots, and the discovery of new images from his vast archive of negatives not yet fully explored. Despite Rulfo’s silence, it is almost impossible not to relate the photographs to the literary work; as Russek notes, “We may appreciate the artistic value of a photograph by Rulfo, but we generally do it through the filter of our previous knowledge of his literature and life, as if the image is imbued with the aura of its authorial figure.” (17) Regarding this last statement, the same could be said about Welty’s photographs, also made public once she was a known writer. A major difference exists, however, in the fact that she wrote extensively about how photography informed her way of seeing the world; she featured photographs and photographers in her stories and novels; and, on occasion, she wrote texts illustrated by photographs.

EUDORA WELTY, PHOTOGRAPHER

Welty begins her memoir, One Writer’s Beginnings, with a section entitled “Learning to See,” thereby establishing, in her life and writing, the interrelationship of the visual and the verbal. In conversation with southern colleagues Shelby Foote and Louis D. Rubin Jr., Welty said, “I took them [photographs] because something appealed to me in the form that a story or an anecdote may have—to capture something.” (Rubin 50) She took photographs and wrote at the same time until, in 1950, she lost her camera and decided not to replace it. Despite prioritizing her involvement with writing fiction, Welty attempted, unsuccessfully, in the 1930s to train as a
professional photographer and, while studying in New York City, she exhibited her photographs in an optician’s gallery.\(^{65}\) In this period, as noted earlier, she also tried—again without success—to sell her stories to a publisher by pairing them with some of her photographs, indicating that she hoped that, despite being unrelated, the photographs would sell the stories. During the depression years in Mississippi, she worked as a journalist for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the position of junior publicity agent, a job that required her to travel throughout her home state—journeys on which, in her spare time, she took photographs that involved her in an intensive observation of specific Mississippi regions, areas that became the ‘places’ that are the contexts for most of her stories.

Although Welty continued taking photographs till the 1950s, the acceptance and publication of her first short story in 1936 consolidated her decision to prioritize writing. Quoted in an interview with Hermione Lee, Welty says, “I had to go on to fiction from photographing. That’s the only way you can really part the veil between people, not in images, but in what comes from the inside, in both subject and writer.” (151) Her words suggest that she situated the practice of photography within the development and exercise of her powers of observation and that, on the one hand, photography preceded and enriched her writing while, on the other hand, photographs were, for her, not as powerful and subjective a means of expression as words. Despite privileging writing, Welty’s literary and photographic works appear intertwined for most critics. In her book *Eudora Welty et la photographie: Naissance d’une vision*, what critic Geraldine Chouard says about Welty’s imagetext autobiographical writings serves as a more

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\(^{65}\) This show was of her photographs only. She had already exhibited in two other galleries. In the 1930s while in New York City, Welty wrote to photographer Berenice Abbott asking to be able to take her class at The New School for Social Research, indicating an interest in perfecting this craft.
general assessment of her work: “Du texte à l’image, de l’image au texte, ainsi se profile l’œuvre de Welty infiniment enrichie au fil du parcours de diverses productions dans les deux registres” (“From text to image and from image to text, Welty’s work appears infinitely enriched when her diverse works in both media are seen in their historical progression”; 140). In 1971 Welty published her first book of photographs, *One Time, One Place*, and in subsequent years more of her photographs were published into books and many were exhibited. Hence, in addition to her notoriety as a writer, her photographs began to receive critical attention: most critics have read the oblique and enigmatic qualities present in her short stories back into their reading of her photographs and, more recently, a few critics have considered the photographic work for its artistic value.

Albeit framing their publications by reminding the reader that the world of Welty’s photographs is also the world of her stories, two fairly recent critical works examine Welty’s photographs primarily as art. One of these studies situates Welty’s work in the context of American artists of the thirties and examines her use of the camera to interpretively represent a world as other visual artists did. This book is the publication catalog of a 2002 exhibition at the Mississippi Museum of Art in Jackson, both entitled *Passionate Observer: Eudora Welty Among Artists of the Thirties* (Barilleaux). Key points made in this publication are Welty’s use of photographs as images that were etched in her memory and became the triggers for her stories, the importance of framing everyday life to both her stories and photographs, the complex compositions of her images, and the photographs as evidence of her powers of observation and her search for secrets in the captured images, secrets that Welty turns into stories. Welty critic Pearl Amelia McHaney’s *Eudora Welty as Photographer*, published in 2009, also focuses on Welty’s photographs as works of art. Essays by Welty critics McHaney and Sandra S. Phillips, as
well as African American photography historian Deborah Willis, discuss Welty’s photographic
technique: light, texture, framing, and design are envisaged as compositional features; the angles
and distances from which Welty takes photographs as well as her expertise in the use of film,
paper, and exposure are discussed in the essays of the critics mentioned above.

Given her knowledge of darkroom techniques, the artistic aspects of Welty’s photographs
are foregrounded in these writings by art and photography critics to describe and highlight
Welty’s particular aesthetics and to comment on how her photographs represent their subjects in
ways unexpected for her time and place.⁶⁶ Evidence of Welty’s mastery of photographic
technique and its influence on her writing is made visible by paying attention to her nonfiction
imagetexts. In an article and in her book, critic Geraldine Chouard has explored at length the
significance of how Welty uses her own photographs in her nonfictional writing. Chouard, in her
article entitled “Arrêt sur image et temporalité dans One Writer’s Beginnings, de Eudora Welty,”
describes the fragmented nature of Welty’s memoir and suggests that the written text takes on
the interruptive character of the photograph and that the nonlinear insertion of snapshots in this
text gives it a new temporality. About the imagetext quality of this memoir, Chouard writes,
“Ainsi, le réel découpé en morceaux choisis, juxtaposés les uns aux autres, transforme l’œuvre
en un véritable patchwork, renforçant au sein du texte un effet de discontinuité analogue à celui
produit par la présence des photographies” (“Thus, the real cut up in selected pieces, juxtaposed
the ones to the others, transforms the work, making it a patchwork that stresses discontinuity that
is analogous to what is produced by the presence of photographs”; “Arrêt sur image” 115).
Ultimately, when art critics assess Welty’s photographs without direct reference to her writing,

⁶⁶ Writer Toni Morrison (“Interview with Mel Brooks”) and historian of photography Deborah Willis (“Eudora
Welty: The Intrepid Observer”) have alluded to Welty’s prescience in her images of African Americans, to her
empathy with the subjects portrayed in images that are oftentimes denunciations of racism.
they end up highlighting and echoing characteristics of her stories, features best discovered, as Chouard does, in Welty’s imagetexts.

In addition to the role photography plays in Welty’s autobiographical writing, it has an important metaphoric and ekphrastic function in her stories. Critic Chouard’s book on Welty’s photographic and literary vision analyzes the use of the device of the itinerant photographer in two short stories, “Why I live at the P. O.” and “Kin,” as well as its use as ekphrasis in two novels (Eudora Welty). For Chouard, Welty makes use of multiple photographic devices and their visual paradigms for dramatic effect and to highlight the social functions of photography. She describes Welty’s social and aesthetic vision in these terms:

… les nombreuses photographies présentes dans la prose de Welty, situées en amont et en aval du processus photographique, accompagnées à l’occasion de leur description ou de leur analyse, offrent un metalanguage où se reflètent les changements culturels du sud et où se glissent aussi, par les possibilités de symbolization du medium, une vaste gamme d’effets et d’affects …

… the numerous photographs in Welty’s prose, situated upstream and downstream of the photographic process, occasionally accompanied by a description or an analysis, offer a metalanguage in which cultural changes in the South are reflected and where a vast range of affects and effects are gleaned by the symbolic possibilities of the medium … (Eudora Welty 51)

Thus, Welty’s critics continue to find that what characterizes her fiction also characterizes her photographs. Welty herself, in essays, interviews, and in her autobiographical writing, stresses the interconnectedness of her work in both media to the point of making the following statement
in an interview with Hermione Lee: “The odd thing is that some of the photographs turned out almost to illustrate the stories I wrote later on” (151). Welty’s publication of autobiographical imagemetexts, the metaphorical use of photography in her stories, and her autobiographical reflections on the importance of the photographic for her writing define the differences between her relationship to the photographic and Juan Rulfo’s. Despite the different nature of their involvement in photography and its significance for their writing, they share a shyness about taking photographs, they are masters of light in their mainly black and white photographs, they were both highly knowledgeable about the process, and their photographs, as well as their stories, are of geographical regions they knew well and cared about deeply. Their photographs are expressions of the qualities Cortázar considers essential for the success of compact and fragmentary works such as the exceptional short story.

In this chapter, I find echoes in both the short stories and the photographs of these two writer-photographers, echoes revealed by the juxtaposition of selected works from both media. My argument is that both Rulfo’s and Welty’s literary and photographic work are outstanding and concrete examples of Cortázar’s more general idea that the modern short story and the photograph share an intense brevity of form that gives them a unique capacity, as works of art, to radically engage readers’ and viewers’ accepted notions of fiction and reality. To demonstrate the creative possibilities contained by juxtaposing selected examples of these two artistic forms, I examine three of Rulfo’s short stories—“Luvina,” “Macario,” and “El hombre”—juxtaposed to five photographs by Rulfo, as well as three of Welty’s short stories—“A Still Moment,” “Why I Live at the P. O.,” and “Powerhouse”—juxtaposed to several Welty photographs. I draw on the features Cortázar defines as necessary for the exceptional short story in his essays “Algunos aspectos del cuento” (“Some Aspects of the Short Story”) and “Del cuento breve y sus
alrededores” (“The Short Story and its Environs”) to describe the interrelationships between the verbal and visual works of these writer-photographers. The concepts Cortázar uses to analyze the qualities he discovers and prescribes for the short story from his knowledge of photography span the entire creative process from the artist’s initial impulse to the completion of the work. Furthermore, the reader’s experience of the story and the viewer’s experience with a photograph should, according to Cortázar, mimic the creative experience of the short story writer. Hence, I find his concepts fitting to establish how the peculiar formal aspects and effects of the short story appear more strikingly when selected stories and photographs from the work of these two writer-photographers are juxtaposed. However much Cortázar’s short stories embody his own ideas about the photograph and the short story, in his theoretical writings he only gives us glimpses of how the photograph possesses the same effects as the short story.

I frame my discussion of Juan Rulfo’s and Eudora Welty’s photographs and short stories using the attributes Cortázar assigns, in his articles mentioned earlier, to his ideas about great short stories: haunting subjects, tense spheres, and explosive effects. Each attribute is the topic of one section that is, in turn, divided into three moments. Cortázar’s concept is briefly explained as it pertains to his theory of the short story and, when necessary, other writers are brought in to expand the relevance of the concept to the photograph. In each section, a commentary on one of Cortázar’s three concepts about the writing of short stories is followed first, by a discussion of my juxtapositions of Rulfo’s photographs and short stories and second, by a discussion of how the juxtaposition of Welty’s photographs and short stories illustrate the same concept. Although most of Rulfo’s and Welty’s short stories and many of their photographs can be said to possess the attributes outlined by Cortázar, I consider the specific works chosen for each section as the most forceful embodiments of the concepts I have chosen to discuss.
HAUNTING SUBJECTS

An appreciation of the hauntingly beautiful and memorable effects of Rulfo’s and Welty’s visual and written work begins with a consideration of what Cortázar calls uncanny subject matter. Cortázar describes the process by which he is possessed by subject matter before he sits down to write a story. This subject matter is usually a situation that appears to him as an inchoate mass. He likens this to remembering dream images upon awakening, images that are highly sensual and not yet rationally meaningful: “… una masa informe sin palabras ni caras ni principio ni fin pero ya un cuento … (“…a shapeless mass without words or faces or beginning or end, but still a story …”; “Del cuento breve” 72; translation in “On the Short Story” 163-164). Sometimes he refers to the intense experience that precedes writing as trancelike, vertiginous, and marvelous: “Escribir un cuento así es simultáneamente terrible y maravilloso” (“To write a story in this way is both terrible and marvelous”; “Del cuento breve” 73-74; translation in “On the Short Story” 165). Cortázar’s short story, “Una flor amarilla” (“A Yellow Flower”), is an example of a story that sprang from his obsession with a given situation and its potential ramifications: a man encounters a child who looks like he did as a child and fears that we are immortal.

In “Algunos aspectos del cuento,” he defines his writing process as the experience of being possessed by a force that seeks expression through him: “En mi caso, la gran mayoría de mis cuentos fueron escritos … al margen de mi voluntad, por encima o por debajo de mi conciencia razonante, como si yo no fuera más que un medium por el cual pasaba y se manifestaba una fuerza ajena” (“In my case, the great majority of my stories were written outside my will, above or below my conscious reasoning, as if I were no more than a medium through which an alien force passed and took shape”; 387; translation in “Some Aspects” 248).
Cortázar’s formless masses that seek expression in stories bring to mind specters that hover in a middle zone searching embodiment and suggest links to the spectral qualities of portrait photography. Cortázar does not address haunting subject matter in the photograph directly. Instead, he illustrates his comments on subject matter in “Del cuento breve y sus alrededores” with enigmatic and ghostly photographic images (Fig. 4.0). In order to develop the connections between the short story form and photography that are merely hinted at in Cortázar’s essay, it will be necessary to refer to Roland Barthes’s writing on photography.

Considering the relationship between photography and death, Barthes suggests that a photographic portrait can make the person photographed feel spectral: “Imaginairement, la Photographie … représente ce moment très subtil où, à vrai dire, je ne suis ni un sujet ni un objet, mais plutôt un sujet qui se sent devenir objet … je deviens vraiment spectre” (“In terms of image-repertoire, Photography … represents that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object … I am truly becoming a spectre”; 30; translation in Camera Lucida 13-14). Although photographs are irreducibly connected to the world of the objective reality they capture, they simultaneously evoke the shifting and ephemeral worlds of dreams, ghosts, and the unknown, where one thing can take on many shapes and meanings. Commenting on the work of the writer Nathaniel Hawthorne, Borges draws attention to his use of symbols containing many and possibly contradictory meanings, reminding us that, if such symbols make no sense in the rational world, they exist unproblematically in the world of dreams: “… que tienen su álgebra singular y secreta, y en cuyo ambiguo territorio una cosa puede ser muchas” (“… that have their singular and secret algebra, and in whose ambiguous territory one thing can be many things”; 683). Hawthorne’s dream worlds and Barthes’s spectral experience with photography resemble the fearfully rich and
fluid intensity of the mood outlined by Cortázar in his description of what he believes the writer must experience to write an exceptional short story. For Cortázar, the writer must then transfer to the story the same intense ambiguity experienced while writing it in order to effectively capture the reader’s attention and thus steal him or her radically away from the everyday.

Although Rulfo and Welty do not use the same terms to describe the writing process, and they often focus on character more strongly than on situation, like Cortázar, they depict the solitary work of the writer as the experience of being a medium through which characters come to life. Rulfo says that writing

… lo lleva a uno a convertirse en una especia de medium de cosas que uno mismo desconoce, pero que, sin saber que solamente el inconsciente o la intuición lo llevan a uno a crear y a seguir creando. Creo que eso es, en principio, la base de todo cuento, de toda historia que se quiere contar. (“… makes me become a kind of medium of things I myself do not know but that make one create and continue creating without knowing that one is driven only by the unconscious or by intuition. I think that this is, in principle, the basis of all short stories, of all storytelling.”; “El desafío” 384).

Somewhat similarly, Welty says in her memoir that the shape of the short story existed in her mind as a young writer and that she always experienced its live energy as she called stories into view with words (One Writer’s Beginnings 68). Her stories are charged with the effects obtained by her extreme sensitivity to what she calls the “irresistible” and “magnetic” qualities of character and place. Thus, the atmosphere of her stories is enigmatic and haunting because of how she imagines her characters’ interactions with the mysteries, usually invisible to them, of the
strange places they inhabit. The result of Welty’s evocation of character and place is a strange mixture of the ghostly and the mundane.

Both writers and Cortázar let themselves be seized in different ways by uncanny subject matter full of the potential they transform into stories. For Rulfo and Welty, it is crucial to find a character, to place him or her in a specific context, and, above all, to know how he or she speaks. They discover their characters as they write and, as soon as they recognize them as living, speaking beings, they follow them wherever they might go as the characters progressively—but not usually in linear fashion—gain more substance. Rulfo calls the moment the imagined character comes alive “intuición,” and this moment is when the writer can disappear and let the character tell his story. For Welty, a sharp ear for regional dialect gives life not only to the narrator-protagonist of short stories such as “Why I live at the P. O.” but also gives flesh to the characters of this strange, yet in some sense common, family drama. Hence, for Cortázar, Rulfo, and Welty, the obsessive, mysterious quality of the creative process must seep into the final product, the short story, to capture the reader in such a way that he or she will have to grasp its ‘loose threads’ in order to weave an interpretation. And, although neither Cortázar nor Rulfo nor Welty write explicitly about ambiguity in photographs, this quality appears abundantly in their photographic work.

In “Del cuento breve y sus alrededores,” Cortázar uses black and white photographs to underscore his earlier ideas about the connections between the short story and the photograph (Fig. 4.0). He includes five photographs in all: three illustrate the short story in general and two are commentaries on the fantastic short story. The first three photographs, images of stairways, are of concern here. The first staircase is seen from above, looking down toward an open door and an empty rocking chair in a bright room in what seems to be an apartment building. In the
second photograph, something dramatic has happened to another stairway: part of it is seen from above and another part, full of debris, appears to the viewer from below going upward. A ghostlike male figure appears to be rushing through the bright front door up the steps; perhaps there has been a fire in the building since there is also debris on the walls of the second floor. The third photograph presents yet another stairway (or, are they all the same?), this time from below looking up. A shadowy male figure, seemingly in movement because he is blurred, is walking up the stairs toward a bright window. Each of these photographs is intense and enigmatic enough to generate a whole host of stories and, if juxtaposed in a variety of possible sequences, these photographs would illustrate the many and often contradictory viewpoints on a subject or an event that one finds in an exceptional short story and that constitute its intensity. Juan Rulfo’s enigmatic photographic images of neighborhood courtyards and his ghostly short story “Luvina” are exemplary of the uncanny and magnetic subject matter in all of his writing.

JUAN RULFO

Many of Rulfo’s photographs are reminiscent of the mute, spectral, and ominous mood found in the photographs used by Cortázar as well as in the early images of Eugène Atget. Atget’s photographs are often of stairways that show traces of life but no human figures. Two urban photographs of stairs, both entitled “Vecindades de la colonia Guerrero” in Juan Rulfo: Homenaje Nacional,67 will guide us in an exploration of how a photograph, especially when its visualization is given words, can feel like it holds a number of powerful stories. Rulfo’s two photographs of stairways contain within their framing and sharply contrasting use of light the

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67 The photographs by Rulfo presented in the illustrations section as figures were copied from Infamundo, where they have no titles. The titles used to identify them here were taken from titles given to them in their first place of publication, Juan Rulfo: Homenaje Nacional, the catalogue for the 1980 exhibit.
capacity to attract and awaken the viewer’s attention to multiple realities, much in the same way exceptional subject matter works for the short story (Fig. 4.1). Cortázar writes:

Lo excepcional reside en una cualidad parecida a la del imán; un buen tema atrae todo un sistema de relaciones conexas, coagula en el autor, y más tarde en el lector, una inmensa cantidad de nociones, entrevisiones, sentimientos y hasta ideas que flotaban virtualmente en su memoria o su sensibilidad … (“Algunos aspectos” 387)

It is exceptional in that it is like a magnet: a good subject attracts an entire system of connected stories, it solidifies in the author, and later in the reader, many notions, glimpses, sentiments, and even ideas which virtually were floating in his memory or his sensibility … (“Some Aspects” 248)

Like magnets, Rulfo’s images of empty interior urban courtyards seize the viewer’s imagination on many levels. The mood that captures the viewer’s gaze is one of quiescent anxiousness. These spaces are enclosed and semiprivate places that the photographer and the viewer are peeping into much in the same way the short story writer takes the reader into the worlds and minds of characters he has peered into. The feeling of being a voyeur is further accentuated in one of the photographs by the unmistakable presence of undergarments among the hanging clothes as well as the positioning of the photographer, who seems to be behind a wall looking in. Additionally, these images are as enigmatic as Rulfo’s short stories: nothing is just what it seems to be. A variety of scenarios are possible here, keeping the viewer apprehensive about what might happen or what might have happened. Who or what will suddenly appear coming up or coming down the steps? The clothes hanging on the lines point to inhabitants; but where are they? Are they involved in a daily routine, such as having lunch? Did they suddenly have to leave their homes?
If so, are the clothes that are hanging to dry and blowing in the wind specters reminding us of the recently departed?

Rulfo’s two images have both the anxious and spectral quality of that inchoate mass that Cortázar describes as the state of mind preceding the emergence of a short story, and they present the required tension in the contrasts of light and darkness in order to evoke the coexistence of contradictory meanings in one space. For example, climbing up the stairs, which can suggest moving forward, is suddenly negated by a wall at the end of the stairs that suggests claustrophobic enclosure. Or, the bright, hanging clothes that suggest living beings simultaneously underline the absence of life, all the more since any other signs of human presence have been obliterated by the darkness. And, finally, these empty staircases, places of transit and exchange, are brightly lit whereas, in contrast, the living spaces where human beings congregate are made invisible by darkness. In his commentary on photography, The Ongoing Moment, critic Geoff Dyer discusses how images of stairs and steps are full of ambiguity. He notes that those who habitually use stairs do not stop to think about them, while a photographer might linger at the foot of a staircase (115). One of these two images taken by Rulfo has given literary critics reason to pause and comment.

The image depicting a stairway in its center, surrounded by a dark interior, has been discussed by critics Pablo Sorozabal Serrano, in his 1985 article “Los pasos del tiempo,” and Raventos-Pons, in her article on Rulfo’s story “Luvina,” titled “La imagen en el discurso estético de ‘Luvina’ e Infamundo de Juan Rulfo.” Their interpretations bespeak the power of such images to attract the viewer’s attention and to generate narratives. For Sorozabal Serrano, this image illustrates a black-and-white dialectics that he finds in other photographs that he analyzes from Infamundo (156). He shows how the contrast of light is at its sharpest in this image, giving
it the power of graphic art. He notices the bright white banisters that reflect the light from above and considers this an illumination of the surrounding poverty. Affirming that this splendid image is neither sensationalist nor sordid, Sorozabal Serrano interprets it as a statement of faith in the power of the oppressed. For Raventos-Pons, this image of the stairway is also a testament to the power of mining the contrasts of light and darkness. The light of the sun pouring down from the roof is so intense that, as she points out, the objects in the dark areas of the image lose all of their substance. The objects in the brightly lit areas of the photograph appear similarly disfigured, and it is this deliberate estrangement effect that Raventos-Pons analyses by juxtaposing this image to Rulfo’s short story “Luvina” (401). In brief, “Luvina” is told as the monologue of a disillusioned teacher whose failure to transform the poor inhabitants of the town called Luvina haunts him and leads him to drink to diminish the pain of his humiliation and loss of ideals. The reader is made to understand that he cannot escape the haunting memories of his experience in Luvina, and, despite his attempts to numb its effects with alcohol he is condemned to relive these memories endlessly. The story begins in a bar (cantina) where the narrator/witness/teacher reconstructs the ghostly scenes of this desolate town for his silent colleague and interlocutor, who is about to leave for Luvina.

The tight framing of the story “Luvina” along with the enigmatic atmosphere of a ghostliness still moored to realistic depictions makes reading it an experience not unlike looking at the photographs of the stair and deserted inner courtyards. The white and black contrasts simultaneously reveal and conceal objects in these worlds such that the viewer of the photograph must find words to decipher what is seen while the reader of the story must construct and reconstruct images from the written text in order to make sense of it. Additionally, in the story a huddled group of women dressed in black are described as silhouettes, visible in ways that make
them invisible as individual human beings. In capturing how the stairways are lit at a decisive moment and in the descriptions of the desolate and spectral atmosphere of this short story, Rulfo selects subject matter that troubles viewers'/readers’ habitual ways of seeing and reading.

As in the dark recesses of the photographs of the stairs, the inhabitants of Luvina—old men, children, and women—appear to merge into the landscape. The women are first depicted as black shining eyes peering at the narrator and his family through cracks in the doors and then as moving flocks of bats, “sus figuras negras sobre el negro fondo de la noche” (“their black figures in the black background of night”; “Luvina” 118; translation in The Burning Plain 99). The narrator indicates also that they move like shadows in the night on their way to get water with their black jugs. Like Rulfo’s photographic subject matter caught in a frame, Luvina is an isolated place of stark surreal contrasts. The external world is for the most part nonexistent for the inhabitants of this place and, if there is contact, it is simply another aggression in what is an incredibly harsh, violent, and impenetrable existence.

In his seminal essay on Rulfo, “Realidad y estilo de Juan Rulfo,” critic Carlos Blanco Aguinaga explains how, in addition to being a spectral, isolated, and violent place, Luvina is also a town where time stands still. He examines how Rulfo’s style suspends time by means of ongoing repetition of words and phrases that evoke circularity and by the way he gives the reader a description of Luvina exclusively through the timeless remembering and ruminations of the narrator within what appears to the reader at first sight to be an objective description of the town and its landscape (85-88). The same oppressive circularity is, for Raventos-Pons, expressed in the town of Luvina’s lack of color, its ghostly shadows and painfully sharp white, black, and gray tonalities. Like Blanco Aguinaga, she underscores violence, oppression, and timelessness in the story; unlike Blanco Aguinaga, she sees a radical potential in the estrangement effects
created in Rulfo’s descriptions of the town as well as in certain photographs she analyzes from the collection *Inframundo*. In foregrounding the ghostlike stillness of this story, both critics attest to the presence of haunting subject matter. The mood depicted in “Luvina” is present in Rulfo’s enigmatic and haunting photographic images of the urban stairways. The inspiration for Eudora Welty’s photographs and short stories also draws on the kind of verbal and visual attentiveness to ghostly subject matter found in the interconnections between Rulfo’s fiction and photography.

**EUDORA WELTY**

The spectral chiaroscuro of Rulfo’s photographs of stairs that were seen to point to resonances in his short story “Luvina” inhabits some of Welty’s photographs and stories, most notably in her dramatic use of light to stress bright whites in otherwise dark images. Her photograph entitled *Sister and Brother/Jackson/1930s* from the photo book *Eudora Welty: Photographs* (Fig. 4.2) makes blindingly visible at its very center the sister’s white dress and the brother’s white shirt in stark contrast to their dark skin and bodies. The figures of the children shown in radical contrasts of black and white are set against a dark grey background, the shadow quality of which serves to make the white clothing even more exaggeratedly prominent and brilliant. This is a photographic portrait of two African American children sitting on the porch of what is most likely their home. Behind them one finds the wooden floor of the porch and the wood doorjamb and one of the house walls, also wood. The open door lets one peek in at what might be a hallway in which perceived depth is due to a sliver of light coming from the slight parting of a window curtain. The house’s doorway in the background, with its deep view of a long corridor, provides a contrast that flattens and accentuates what is foregrounded in the frame of the photograph, the portrait of the children sitting on the porch. At first, the whiteness of their
clothing functions as a curtain that, like the masking effect of the veil in Welty’s comments on photography, requires the storyteller to part the veil by which she imparts the development of a story that delves beyond surface appearances, a challenge, in turn, presented to the reader by the story and to the viewer by the photograph. In this photograph, the blinding effect of the white clothing makes it difficult to see the children’s eyes and facial expressions, but when the image is considered attentively and ‘given words,’ it becomes clear that the portrayed children are looking straight at the camera and hence are seen to very directly interpellate the viewer. Welty’s striking use of the chiaroscuro in this image invites the viewer to choose, on the one hand, to closely examine the image and find words to speculate on the possible meanings of the children’s expressions. Or, on the other hand, the viewer could dismiss the image altogether because of how its contrast makes it dark and difficult to interpret. Thus, the framing of this image, its contrasts and the relationship of its background to its foreground, give it the uncanny power to reveal and conceal its subject matter.

The contradictory aspects present in this photograph are consistent with another tension noticed by those who discuss the unusual richness of Welty’s depression-era Mississippi photographs, especially the coexistence of dignity and poverty in her portraits. If the viewer were to focus exclusively on the children’s clothing, this image of a brother and sister would connote 1930s Southern—here, African American—poverty. However, when the children’s facial expressions are scrutinized, a tension appears between their resilient and dignified expressions and the poor state of their very white clothing. The viewer who accepts the challenge of looking attentively at this photograph is urged to imagine in words the endless stories that might emerge from its enigmatic contrasts, beginning with a questioning of the relationship of this white photographer to the African American children portrayed in the 1930s. Welty, herself, and
numerous critics have alluded to the fact that her photographs often function as memory triggers for situations etched in her mind as possible subject matter for stories. Learned in adolescence, Welty’s ability to visually frame scenes with storytelling potential reveals her acute observational skills. For example, the sight of an old woman on a country road gave Welty the chance to read in her expression and bodily gestures the narrative of a rich and perplexing life story. Critic Geoff Dyer stresses Welty’s understanding of the fictional potential of gesture when he quotes her, saying, “Every feeling waits upon its gesture” (54). The old woman’s movements, captured in Welty’s mind like a snapshot, are given a narrative that transforms and complicates the initial visual image that was based on glimpsing a set of complex physical features. Hence, visual images can act like magnets, attracting the writer’s attention and demanding the exploration of one of many possible storylines. The blinding whites of the children’s clothing in Welty’s photograph can be seen to generate the kinds of defamiliarizing and interruptive photographic effects that contribute to the power of the extreme light and whiteness that characterize the sudden appearance of the snowy heron in Welty’s story “A Still Moment.”

The centrality and mysteriousness of the bright white children’s clothing in the photograph resonates with a key photographic moment in Welty’s short story “A Still Moment”: the climactic breach in the narrative due to the startling appearance of a white heron in the crepuscular light amidst the thick vegetation and dark ghostly atmosphere of the Old Natchez Trace. The Trace itself acts like Cortázar’s magnet by attracting stories and making them intersect; in its history and in this story, it is a haunted place. Three travelers traverse this space in trajectories that reveal their mindsets as they negotiate their passing through: a preacher, Lorenzo Dow, rushes to a church meeting, taking the path in a straight line; an outlaw, James Murrell, enters the path obliquely with the intent to kill the preacher; a young scientist and artist,
the student Audubon, has been circling around the Trace looking for birds. Each is obsessed with his mission and all three will be interrupted at the same time by the luminous appearance of a white heron, an event that brings them together to a full stop and momentarily demands their complete attention. Welty uses the heron’s white plumage and the play of light cast by its alighting among the horses and the three men to suggest this moment’s potential for heightened or diminished perception, a moment addressed to the reader since the three travelers’ pursuits are intensified rather than being questioned after the event. The preacher integrates the appearance of the white bird as godliness, an interruption that strengthens his mission and his fears by his dismissal of the event as a temporary stop; the outlaw interprets the event and its luminosity only as the potentially threatening revelation of his past evil deeds and of a rebellion he wants to lead, manipulating slaves and others for his own ends. At first, and unlike the former characters, Audubon cherishes the chance appearance of the snowy heron and quietly observes the bird’s magic presence. To the horror of the preacher and to the joy of the outlaw, Audubon then shoots the bird in a gesture symbolic of the photographic. Although the vision of the white heron offers its observers an occasion for reflection, such a state is clearly impossible for them because, no matter how deluded, these three men are portrayed as being obsessed with retaining the total yet illusory control of their actions. For the characters, the interruptive event serves simply to confirm their obsessions such that the story’s end is in its beginning; the luminous event does not enlighten them, and their lives go on.

Despite the story’s apparent closure, the characters’ inability to see the transformative possibilities of the photographic moment of the alighting of the snowy heron in the dark and mysterious Old Natchez Trace reveals yet another dimension of this story, its summons to the reader. A metanarrative interpretation emerges when thinking about this story in terms of the
relationships and differences between photography and the short story. For Welty, a photograph evokes the observation of a situation that can become the subject of a short story only when given the words that will transform it by making it come alive as a fiction. Of the three men experiencing this moment of light, Audubon is the closest to being a creative artist. Much like when exclusive focus is set on the indexical quality of a photograph, Audubon can be seen to assume that only an anatomically correct drawing will come from his observation of the bird he has shot and bagged. Indeed, the dead bird is, like a photograph, something frozen and cut out of the real. Despite the fact that Audubon says that he cannot paint the bird from memory, the reader must grapple with the dilemma of whether or not Audubon would be able to use the dead bird as a mnemonic device, bringing his imagination to the drawing of the bird from the observation of its carcass. By posing this question to the reader, Welty’s story illustrates the limits of a purely scientific stance, which, in photographic terms, exists when images are thought of as documents or transparent views on the world at large. Welty’s story itself, however, enacts the movement from the photographic to storytelling, and it illustrates what the photographic moment portends when, thanks to the creative artist’s imagination, an event ‘photographed’ is given the words that will breathe life into it and turn it into a story. The question about artistic creation posed by the story is further informed by how Welty wrote the story and by the challenge she faced to make it come alive. According to her, this story was written based on facts that she read regarding the history of Mississippi, the Old Natchez Trace, and her three protagonists. In a 1993 interview with Jan Nordby Gretlund, Welty states, “It is the only time I ever wrote out of things I’ve read instead of out of living” (1996, 254).

Welty’s sense of the power of the photographic to heighten the enigmatic in fiction is evident in her use of light in “A Still Moment”: the sudden appearance of brightness in the
fading evening light contrasted to the long shadows of twilight accentuate the Trace’s mystery and darkness. She observes the effects of the oftentimes confusing interplay of light and darkness when, in “Some Notes on River Country,” she writes,

Foliage and flowers alike have a quality of light and dark as well as color in Southern sun, and sometimes a seeming motion like dancing due to the flicker of the heat, and are luminous or opaque according to the time of day or the density of the summer air. In early morning or in the light of evening they become translucent and ethereal, but at noon they blaze or darken opaquely, and the same flower may seem sultry or delicate in its being all according to when you see it.

(769)

In “A Still Moment,” the narrated events, their climax, and their mystery are depicted as if a photographic eye is grasping and intricately manipulating lighting effects. The story’s setting in time is a twilight moment captured and stilled at the crossroads of sunlight and the darkness of night. Each protagonist is portrayed in terms of light and dark. The “dusky shapes” of Dow’s sinners are contrasted to fireflies that embody Dow’s saved souls, and his eyes are depicted by Audubon as “fires in abysses”; Murrell, who owes his existence to his ability to hide light, is darkness incarnate; Audubon tends to focus on light, on rivers and forests brimming with light, but, while observing the conflicts of light and darkness in the other characters, his shooting of the bright snowy heron extinguishes (day)light and can be seen to bring on the darkness of night and to set in motion the end of the story with the effects of a shock.

The framing of this story in terms of light and darkness also encapsulates its mystery, especially in the ghostly mood of the obscure landscape of the Trace. Mystery is vividly present as the flickering of light, when sunlight is reflected in the eyes of the horses and men in the story
and is said to summon an inexplicable “wildness.” Welty’s descriptions of the Trace in this story mirror her comments about experiencing the ghostly presence of humans in abandoned regional towns: “I have felt many times there a sense of place as powerful as if it were visible and walking and could touch me” (“Some Notes on River Country” 760).

Welty finds in her essay “Words into Fiction” that “Mystery … lies in the use of language to express life” (137), but it also resides in her ability to photographically render the effects of light in her stories in order to intensify their enigmatic and haunting qualities, qualities made to intentionally bewilder the reader. The still moment of her story is a spatial and silent moment: contrasted to the trajectories of the three travelers and to the readers who travel with them, the moment in the clearing near the venerable oak tree mirrors the reader’s vision of the Trace as a region shrouded in mystery and ghostly presences that constitute the story’s background and atmosphere. Critics have called Welty’s narrators “photographic eyes” and have alluded to the stories as “snapshots,” noticing their synchronic and poetic qualities instead of a diachronic focus on plot. Poetically, the whiteness of the heron’s plumage in the short story and the whiteness of Brother and Sister’s clothing in the photograph stand in contrast to and emphasize the many shades of darkness that surround them, provocatively interrupting narrative time and image readability. Whiteness figures as a marker in both media that works to counteract readers’ and viewers’ usual perceptions while, at the same time, inviting them to probe more deeply into the secrets of the folds of darkness and light as configured by each medium.

In summary, the first phase in the writing of a short story, as delineated by Cortázar, involves the presence of uncanny subject matter seeking and seizing a writer who, as a medium, will turn this formless and haunting subject matter into an exceptional short story. The evidence of this initial story writing moment is found in the completed story because the story itself must
exert a pull on the reader that carries the full force of the writer’s struggle to craft a story from the formless mass. The strange and the mysterious in Rulfo and Welty’s stories as well as their writings about writing confirm Cortázar’s insistence on the importance of this phase for the writing of great stories. In Rulfo’s stories, ordinary events take on uncanny qualities that defy simple understanding. In her essay “The Death of the Storyteller and the Poetics of (Un)Containment: Juan Rulfo’s El llano en llamas,” critic Lucy Bell describes the narrator’s role in the preservation of the mysterious: “The narrator’s inability to understand, explain, and rationalize, then, allows otherness to remain as otherness, preventing the absorption of the unexplained into the explained, the folding of the strange back into the normal” (826). The ghostly atmosphere of Rulfo’s stories finds expression in his handling of black and white light in his photographs; the places he selects to photograph feel haunted by how they are framed and by the lack of human figures and details that mark their presences as absences. The characters of Welty’s stories are embodiments of the places they inhabit, and these places are haunted either by the disappearance of their inhabitants made visible in abandoned and often ruined structures or by the spectral presence of layers of history that determine their behaviors, most often unconsciously. As in her stories, Welty manipulates light and darkness in her photographs to heighten the mysteriousness of what is in the image and to let the ambiguities and tensions develop between the photographer’s framing and the framed subject’s expression. To continue exploring the complementarity between Rulfo’s and Welty’s photographs and short stories and their capacity to critically challenge our perceptions of reality and fiction, it is necessary to consider how, according to Cortázar, the exceptional short story, like the photograph, is constructed.
TENSE SPHERES

Cortázar believes that effective short stories should be constructed like tense spheres, a quality that he calls the story’s sphericity and attributes to the craft of the writer. A translator of Edgar Allan Poe and an admirer of Uruguayan short story writer Horacio Quiroga, Cortázar’s sphericity recalls the creation and presentation of radically enclosed worlds found in Poe’s and Quiroga’s stories. The narrator is usually a protagonist moving within a spherical world that is so tautly constructed that it expands but does not burst because of the writer’s skilled use of controlled and rational narrative technique. Cortázar writes,

… el narrador pudo haber sido uno de los personajes, es decir que la situación narrativa en sí debe nacer y darse dentro de la esfera, trabajando del interior hacia el exterior, sin que los límites del relato se vean trazados como quien modela una esfera de arcilla. (Del cuento breve 60)

… the narrator can be one of the characters, which means that the narrative situation itself must be born and die within the sphere, working from the interior to the exterior, not from outside in as if you were modeling the sphere out of clay.

(“On the Short Story” 158)

In “Algunos aspectos del cuento,” he uses Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado” and Hemingway’s “The Killers” to exemplify stories that are constructed like spheres whose intensity depends on placing the reader immediately and without distraction into the heart of the tale: intensity is produced here by the elimination of all elements unrelated to the drama. Another kind of intensity—called “tensión” by Cortázar—is seen to be manifest as the gradual development of tension and suspense in short stories that seem at first to be simple anecdotes. This tension is inherent and said to stress the hidden forces that underlie the story and that
‘kidnap’ the reader, often without his or her awareness. The short stories of Anton Chekhov, Franz Kafka, Henry James, D. H. Lawrence, and Katherine Mansfield are given by Cortázar as examples of stories where tension unfolds stealthily and by degrees. For the most part, Rulfo’s and Welty’s stories are constructed using a combination of intensity and internal tension, however, Rulfo’s stories tend to be more formally intense whereas in Welty’s stories tension is more slowly and captivatingly disclosed.

Rulfo’s short stories are dramatizations of single events where a sense of urgency, tension, and conflict appears in his first sentences and persists throughout the narrative. Stark contrasts of light and darkness are one way this writer confines contradictory elements within the frames of his prose and photographic images, and such elements are seen to illustrate the description of high-strung tension that characterizes Cortázar’s idea that short stories must be constructed like tense spheres. Eudora Welty, on the other hand, thinks of the story as two superimposed images in a given frame. It is the ongoing tension between these pictures—that of the world and that of the writer’s imagination—that gives the framed matter its dramatic intensity, albeit with the same effects as Cortázar’s spherical framing despite a lesser emphasis on framing as containment of pressure. Ultimately, the short story should, according to Cortázar, be “secreto y replegado ensimismo” (“secret and withdrawn”), “caracol del lenguaje” (“language in the form of a snail”), and “sometido a una alta presión espiritual y formal” (“subject to great spiritual and formal pressure”; “Algunos aspectos” 383).

In Teoría y técnica del cuento, critic Enrique Anderson Imbert echoes Cortázar when he points to the short story’s focus on depth instead of breadth: depth is mandated by the short story’s economy of means, by its need for a pre-established plan whereby all details are tightly bound to the design, and by the short story’s principal characteristic, the single effect, which
more often than not involves bringing the end of the story into its beginning. When Anderson Imbert says, “La breve unidad de un cuento consiste en que los hilos de la acción narrada se urden en un trama” (“The brevity and unity of a short story happens when the threads of its action are woven into a plot”; 32), he means that a compressed and vigorous plot depends on a tight weaving of actions that contains the tension and conflict that characterize Cortázar’s notion of sphericity. To create a forceful single effect requires, according to Anderson Imbert and Cortázar, a radical pairing down of the use of adjectives to suggest events instead of describing them. Although Cortázar does not elaborate on how, in photography, one achieves such a minimalist single effect, his references to the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson’s theory of photographic composition point to interesting analogies.

Seizing “the decisive moment” involves an acute ability to see the simultaneous coming together of what the eye sees and what the photographer wants to fix in an image that, to be successful, must convey the most revealing arrangement of elements. In “The Decisive Moment,” Cartier-Bresson describes this action as “capturing the rhythm of the world of the real” (32). The power of Cartier-Bresson’s photographic image is due, according to Welty, to the artistic capture of real life situations. She says, “One feels he has used … his unerring equilibrium, his recognition of the comic, and indeed his world traveler’s experience of the profundity of long despair … to let them [the photographs] show and suggest what [his subjects’] daily life is” (qtd. in Johnston xiv). Rulfo is known to have been silent about his photography, and therefore, he made no written comments about Cartier-Bresson. However, his familiarity with the French photographer is known from interviews and written remarks from friends and from the fact that in 1934 he wrote an article based on this photographer’s images of Mexico, images he used to talk about Mexico and not about Cartier-Bresson (González Boixo 273). By
analyzing Rulfo’s photographs, critic Daniele de Luigi states that Cartier-Bresson was a model for Rulfo, but de Luigi also notes major differences between the two: a different sense of timing and a divergence of stress on either form or content (295). What is retained for the relationship between the short story and photography from Cartier-Bresson’s ideas is the photographer’s ability to arrest movement such that the intensity of the moment captured bespeaks movement itself and, as a consequence, the image is made to feel alive, to be given the potential to become a story.

The vitality or acute tension that can be found in a photographic image that moves the viewer is noted by Barthes as the nervous excitement that attracts the viewer’s gaze, a magnetic agitation that is internal to the image and that creates pressure such that what is mute seems to demand speech (Camera Lucida 18-19). Barthes’s agitation and Cartier-Bresson’s framing exemplify Cortázar’s idea that the short story involves capturing an intense, vibrating, and multilayered reality. Rulfo’s written work and his photographs exemplify such qualities: their compactness and dense subject matter produce shock effects. Commenting on Rulfo’s novel, Pedro Páramo, critic Susan Sontag writes in the foreword to the English translation that his style is one of “bewitching concision and directness” (“Foreword” vii), a description that is apt for his short stories and photographs as well. In a 1974 interview in Venezuela, Rulfo himself has spoken about how he deliberately takes explanations out of his narratives: En cuanto a la forma, al estilo … pues sí, trate efectivamente de ejercitar un estilo, de hacer una especie de experimento; tratar de evitar la retórica, matar el adjetivo, pelearme con el adjetivo … (“As to the form, the style … well yes, I effectively tried to create a style, to try a kind of experiment; trying to avoid rhetoric, kill the adjective, struggle with the adjective …” ; “Juan Rulfo examina” 878).
Compression in Welty’s stories and photographs is present, as critic Jan Nordby Gretlund remarks, in her selection and use of detail as a means of concentratıng her observations about character and place, the two essential features of her short stories. (“The Terrible and Marvelous” 109). In her essay on the photographic and Welty’s compositional style, critic Harriet Pollack notes that the frames of Welty’s stories are like photographic frames; she emphasizes the compact style of composition in which Welty’s framing of selected details serves to expose the gradual unfolding of story elements (“Photographic Convention” 22). Tension grows within Welty’s stories and does not often relent: the “… quiet shimmering from within …” that Welty finds in Chekhov’s stories and that endures after the story’s actual ending is an apt description of the internal tension in her own stories, as well as in her photographs (Welty, “Reality in Chekhov’s Stories” 79) As tension mounts, the reader is made to feel insecure and unstable and, even when this tension is seen to erupt, a lack of explanation stymies any conventional reader expectations. Such expectations are upended, as Welty herself suggests, by the fact that the shape of a story is ephemeral, a feeling that “… appears as it [the story] is being written or read” (Welty, “Words into Fiction” 143).

Rulfo’s and Welty’s experience of paring off descriptions and using detail for maximum effect is shared by Cortázar, who, in conversation with the journalist Omar Prego, speaks about how reading Jorge Luis Borges influenced his own writing: he learned the power of a concise writing style by noticing the compactness of Borges’s prose due, in part, to the rejection of the adjective (Prego 60). Talking with Charles Bunting, Welty echoes the need for tight construction as promoted by Cortázar. She says, “In the case of the short story, you can’t ever let the tautness of the line relax. It has to be strung very tight upon its single thread …” (Bunting 45). Like
Cortázar and Welty, Rulfo highlights the story’s compactness by declaring his predilection for the short story because of its formal constraints. In “El desafío de la creación” he says, “Para mí el cuento es un género realmente más importante que la novela, porque hay que concentrarse en unas cuantas páginas para decir muchas cosas, hay que sintetizar, hay que frenarse …” (“For me the short story is really a more important genre than the novel, because one has to compress in a few pages the many things one wants to say, one has to synthesize, to restrain oneself …”; 385).

JUAN RULFO

Rulfo’s extreme condensation is achieved by his meticulous attention to language and by the creation of fictional worlds where tension is dramatically present in the first sentences of each story. Blanco Aguinaga has explained the ability of Rulfo’s stories to create the impression of motion at a standstill by constructing contexts where the usual constraints of time and space do not operate (85). Within the time-bound constraint of narrative, Rulfo figures out how to seize and transmit the nonsequential, nonlinear experience of human beings by locating the narration of his stories in the narrator–protagonist’s memory. Here, instead of being linear, the recollection or retelling works radially, producing the circular impression of being in an intensely closed sphere. Narrator–protagonists remember events in Rulfo’s stories in a vibrating, reiterative, often obsessive and nonlogical manner that resonates with the images Cortázar uses to describe the centrifugal force of the short story: the magnet, the atom, and the sun, each one the center of a force field. A clue to the similarities between Rulfo’s stories and photographs can be found in what the photographer and theorist Joan Fontcuberta has to say about photography and memory in his book El beso de Judas: Fotografía y verdad. He says, “… el principio básico de la memoria como el de la fotografía es que las cosas han de morir en orden para vivir para siempre.
Y en la eternidad no cuenta el tiempo …” (“… the basic principle of memory and of photography is that things have to die in order to live forever. And in eternity time doesn’t count …”; Fontcuberta 70). If the dead protagonists of Rulfo’s novel Pedro Páramo illustrate Fontcuberta’s point perfectly by not being subject to habitual notions of time and space, the narrator–protagonists of the short stories in the collection El llano en llamas also escape the constraints of time by telling us only what they remember: they are confined to telling what has already happened and cannot change. In their memories, chronological time no longer rules, it has become spatialized.

One photograph, Casa en llamas (“Burning House”), and “Macario,” a short story from El llano en llamas, illustrate how Cortázar’s ideas about sphericity are present in Rulfo’s work. The photograph entitled Casa en llamas is the frontispiece of Inframundo and the first photograph of the ninety-six in this collection (Fig. 4.3). It is an image of a house that has burned or is still burning, wherein clouds of white smoke gather and issue forth lightly through a missing front door and upward through the collapsed roof. What remains of the structure, four stone walls and an occasional beam, fills the image almost completely, leaving a glimpse of sky on top and behind the ruin and some earth and grass below, in front of the destroyed house. The stones that make up the walls of this smoldering house are lit and in focus as are the recognizable bits of vegetation in what we see of a front yard. In contrast, the white smoke covers anything that might still be inside. The smoke is the lightest part of the image and therefore invites the viewer to peer into the private interior space of someone’s home while, at the same time, not allowing anything in that space but white smoke to be seen.

The foregrounding of the smoldering ruin in this image intensifies the drama of this incident and simultaneously gives no clues as to what might have happened. Although the ruin
occupies most of the space in the frame, it is not fully contained within it. Parts of the ruin on the left side of the image have been excluded. The close up of the house on fire brings the subject of the image closer to the viewer but also conceals some of the structure and isolates it from its environment such that the viewer must exert much more effort to make sense of the image. No doubt that this photograph heads the collection of images in *Inframundo* because of its metaphoric connection to Rulfo’s short story “El llano en llamas,” which is also the title of his collection of short stories. This image, however, can also be thought of as an embodiment of Cortázar’s definition of the short story as a perfectly constructed sphere.

In *Casa en llamas*, the fire destroyed the house from the inside out in a movement akin to how, for Cortázar, the short story should be written from inside the sphere, exerting equally strong pressure on all sides. In fact, the smoke spirals out of the house and feels uncontained, but at the same time, Rulfo’s photographic framing is seen to contain the escaping smoke. And, since the fire in the image does not seem to have ended, Rulfo, the photographer, has caught this image in media res: Rulfo’s short stories often begin in media res. The contrasts of the white smoke and the dark shadowy walls are reminiscent of Rulfo’s skilled use of lightness and darkness in his stories to confound the reader’s habitual associations with what is lit and what is in the dark. In this image, what is lit is not seen whereas what is dark is clear. The same contrast intensifies the image and makes it vibrate: the clouds of smoke inside the ruin seem to rumble and roar. Two semi-translucent puffs of white smoke on either side of the missing front door appear to be hovering ghosts, giving the image an eerie and spectral quality enhanced by the fact that the only human presence in the image is the ruined structure itself. In his essay “Temas y problemas,” Mario Benedetti writes about the spectral quality of Rulfo’s landscapes, “En Rulfo, el paisaje es presencia fantasmal, el lector tiene la noción de que existe aunque no se lo mencione, pero pocas
For Rulfo, landscape is ghostly presence, the reader believes it exists even when it is not mentioned, but only on rare occasions can the reader imagine such a barren environment that is nevertheless so indispensable” (qtd. in Morillas Ventura 121). If, in Rulfo’s stories, landscapes appear mysterious because they are never realistically described, in Casa en llamas this rural house, captured in its destruction by fire, is strangely more present because of its opacity. As in most of Rulfo’s photographs and short stories, the viewer/reader is confronted with a distorted and strange fictional world that is described, however, in simple and down-to-earth terms: this combination troubles customary ways of seeing and forces the viewer and reader to stop and look and interpret. Casa en llamas, a humble dwelling in ruins in the Mexican rural landscape, is like a tense sphere, condensed in its tight frame and shot at exactly the right time to capture haunting light effects. The short story “Macario” is, similarly, a tightly woven tale full of contradictory possibilities that exude an atmosphere of heightened tension.

“Macario,” one of the short stories from El llano en llamas, stands out as perhaps the most perfect example of Cortázar’s idea of sphericity. It is an uninterrupted interior monologue told by a child/adolescent whose exact age is unclear, whose name the reader only knows from the title, and who informs us that he is mentally challenged. The story takes place in the narrator–protagonist’s mind while he is seated waiting for frogs to come out of the sewer so that he can kill them to please his godmother, who can’t sleep because of their croaking. We find the protagonist and narrator Macario in the very same position at the beginning and end of this long rumination. The circular framing of this story is intensified by two memories that recur throughout in almost the same words and phrases: his obsessive fear of eternal condemnation and his longing to escape in the erotic memories of infantile bliss with Felipa, who seems to have
been his wet nurse for longer than usual. Sergio Fernández calls Rulfo’s language “… poético, combinación magnífica de opacidad y luz” (“… poetic, magnificent combination of opacity and light”; 45). The contrast of light and darkness appears throughout and encompasses other conflicts, such as good and evil or inner and external reality. Macario, the protagonist, actually quotes the words of a priest who situates good in light and evil in darkness. He prefers remaining in the darkness of his room because it protects him from physical abuse, and he believes this same darkness, by making him invisible, hides him from the sins that pursue him. It is also in the darkness of night that he feels accompanied and protected as when, in the past, Felipa came to his room, lay in bed with him, and breastfed him. Daylight reminds him of the perils of being physically harassed on the street, of becoming violent himself, and of the punishing acts of his godmother, who, it must also be said, protects him by lodging and feeding him.

Macario’s memories are haunted by a cacophony of diverse sounds that make his universe—the story itself—vibrate, starting with the sounds of his own words. Although there is at least one moment where there is a possibility of imagining an interlocutor, Macario seems just to be speaking to himself, and, from what he tells us, he does not really communicate with anyone. He tells us that he talks so that he will not be sent to hell without passing through purgatory where he might meet his parents. Actually, he too is, in life, a soul in pain wandering aimlessly and endlessly. Other sounds punctuate and reinforce the obsessive circularity and the vibrating fixity of the short story. They are the sound of the board used to kill the frogs, the sound of the drum that he likes and tries to replicate by banging his head on a stone, the sound of crushing roaches in his room, and the sound of crickets, a sound he likes because he has been told that it, like his monologue, keeps at bay the shrieks of the souls in purgatory. Critic Mónica Mansour connects the sounds in Rulfo’s prose to memory when she says, “… la obra de Rulfo es
una urdimbre de ecos, piedras que rebotan sin cesar contra las laderas de un barranco, de manera que las ondas sonoras se cruzan una y otra vez para crear armonías y disonancias” (“… Rulfo’s work is a ‘warp’ of echoes, stones that ceaselessly bounce off the sides of the wall of a ravine [gorge] such that sound waves cross each other time and again creating harmonies and dissonances”; 299). One memory bleeds into another in Macario’s monologue as he describes the gushing of breast milk on his tongue or the oozing of blood he provokes by picking at his scabs. The sense that these memories are eternal, outside of time or spatialized, is conveyed by the fact that Macario remembers them in the present tense. And since the same memories reappear, the atmosphere of this mental universe feels stifling. The two situations he longs for, being breastfed and trying to heal Felipa’s wound again, are remembered in the past tense, as if to accentuate a sense of loss.

Critic Gustavo Fares remarks that in “Macario” there are no characters external to the story: the reader is forced to enter directly into a monologue that unfolds from within (45). Rulfo appears to have eliminated any external mediation, representing only the narrator–protagonist’s point of view. However, in his examination of the dialectic of inner and outer in “Macario,” Fares discovers the one explicit mark of the writer—the title of the story. By giving the story a title and making that title the only instance in which the name of the narrator–protagonist is mentioned, Rulfo has created a place and a point of view external to his text (Fares 48). The title of this story—a self-enclosed universe—functions as both frame and image caption. As a frame, it is the container of the interior monologue, and as a caption, it suggests an opening to question and commentary, the first question stemming from the contradiction between the presence of the writer in the title and the impression of the absence of the writer in the story, or, as Fares notes, the impossibility of a text without mediation (48). Other openings that stimulate reader
participation are the problems posed by the unreliability of the narrator (Is he mentally deficient? Is he telling the truth? Has he done what he says they say he did?) and the lack of any knowledge about the sin this child has supposedly committed, a sin that exerts continued pressure on his mind.

Finally, in writing about how an everyday anecdote can hide a much larger reality, Cortázar alludes to the metaphor of a seed in which a giant tree resides in order to describe the exceptional short story’s expansive potential (“Algunos aspectos” 388). Similarly, the reader of “Macario” discovers a whole village in the narrator–protagonist’s mind. The violent realities of everyday rural life, the godmother’s power over Macario and Felipa (she has the money, gives orders, and decides who eats and how much), the rigid and cruel orthodoxy of the church, the physical abuse visited on Macario by those who mock him, all suggest a violent external reality that is reflected in Macario himself, in his violent thoughts about the villagers and, most notably, in his violence toward himself. An understanding of Macario’s violent historical and social reality expands progressively from the reader’s engagement with the story and grows beyond the story itself when broader questions appear as the reader reconstructs the child’s story from the fragments of knowledge offered by the narrator. Equally dramatic, the photograph *Casa en llamas* confronts the viewer with its enigmas, compelling him or her to find meaning from among the contradictory possibilities offered by this fictional rendition of an actual burning house.

EUDORA WELTY

The world at large enters Welty’s stories when the writer (and, ultimately, the reader) projects his or her imagination onto the world, a process that results in the writing of stories. This imaginative relationship to place involves—for the writer and, especially, for the reader—seeing
the world at large anew through her stories, in other words, through a number of much smaller fictional lenses. Recalling his interview with Welty, critic Danny Heitman describes the wide impact of her stories: “Welty’s stories are worlds unveiled in delicate economy. They are like paperweight villages in the palm of the hand, small but endlessly arresting” (292). Like the movements, gestures, and exchanged looks in her photographs, her stories—often thought of as snapshots by herself and her critics—are compact constructions containing internal tensions and dilemmas intended to point the reader toward a richer appreciation of self and the world at large.

The work of condensation that contains and organizes the intensity of the brimming material of her short stories is best expressed using Welty’s own metaphor, that of the China night-light. In her essay, “Place in Fiction,” Welty remembers what she calls a China night-light, an optical device that resembles the magic lantern. She describes it as a “small lamp” with a porcelain shade that, when lit, reveals a secret. The one she remembers had, when unlit, a painted scene of London on its shade. When lit, however, London appeared on fire, a depiction of the great fire of September 1666. The enchantment effects of the lamp reside, for Welty, in the illusory perception of a unified image from the superimposition of what she calls “… the combination of internal and external, glowing at the imagination as one …” (784). The internal and the external are the two intersecting fields that constitute the double vision that she explains in her essay “Writing and Analyzing a Story,” where she writes, “The outside world and the writer’s response to it, the story’s quotients, are always different, always differing in the combining; they are always—or so it seems to me—most intimately connected with each other” (774). What the writer gets from ‘seeing double’ is the opportunity to find enrichment and critical conjecture to a relationship with what Welty calls place. She says, “It [place] never really stops informing us, for
it is forever astir, alive, changing, reflecting, like the mind of man itself” (“Place in Fiction” 792).

The situations and characters of Welty’s short stories are imbued with life caught in its contradictions or resisting its limits and pushing up against the story’s framing. The lighting that causes the magic transformation depicted in the China night-light can be seen, on the one hand, as the writer’s ability to give life to character and situation, to write powerful and compressed fiction by an interweaving of the worldly and the imaginative. The transformation, by light, of the initial image on the lampshade into a more complex image connotes movement and narrative possibilities, but, like a photograph, the lit image is, on the other hand, a fixed image. Light in photography works to capture the event by imprinting it on film as a still image. Although there is magic in the ability of a machine to record and reproduce the captured scene and in the fact that these processes are usually invisible to the subject of the image and its viewer, unlike the story, the photographic image is mute. Many of Welty’s photographic images, however, capture scenes, gestures, and human interactions in ways that compel the viewer to find words and to imagine stories from the dynamics gathered from the complex configurations caught in the photograph’s frame. Commenting on Welty’s visual imagination, critic Carol Ann Johnston confirms this by saying, “From the gestures captured in these [Welty’s] pictures, we can see the beginnings of stories…” (37).

Welty’s photograph *Back Street/New Orleans/1930s* (Fig.4.4) captures and renders the interactive gestures of women and children in the courtyard of a poor section of town such that this movement within an enclosure recalls Cortázar’s idea of the short story as a sphere containing tremulous movement. The paradox gleaned from Welty’s image stems from the tension between its framing of the scene and its central focus. A lively scene at the center of the
image is contained by housing units positioned in a rectangular fashion, like an enclosure around the yard. The bottom frame of the image is a cement sidewalk from which the photograph is taken. Calling attention to Welty’s framing of this courtyard—already shaped as a rectangle by the positioning of its housing units—suggests and accentuates the dual features of such an enclosure: the poor white inhabitants are isolated and confined in their difficult circumstances while at the same time the protective aspect of the enclosure is made manifest in the way the group activities are presented. A sense of community issues from the children playing in groups, and evidence of neighborhood solidarity is present in the depiction of a woman on the stairs, standing between two floors in conversation with other women that are visible enough to suggest the presence of a lively social grouping. The frozen gestures of the figures in this photographic image have been caught in media res such that their continuation or completion is easily imagined by the words that might be brought to creatively animate this photograph’s suspended gestures.

Critics of Welty’s work, photographic and literary, all agree that her writing is triggered and informed by her extraordinary visual sense. This is confirmed, furthermore, by the use of visual terms in the titles of her books, in her articles, and in articles and books by her critics.68 One visual element in the community dynamic portrayed in *Back Street/New Orleans/1930s* demands attention by the bright objects that signal absence: the men missing from this community scene inhabit the place, nevertheless, in the laundered clothing hanging in the courtyard in a crisscross fashion, and this ghostly laundry strangely connotes their presence. A characteristic of Welty’s images is that their depictions of social interaction highlight the noisy

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and energetic qualities of place, a feature that is also true of her stories. In a 1984 interview with Barbara Lazear Ascher, Welty is quoted as having said, “What I try to show in fiction are the truths of human relationships. But you have to make up the lies of fiction to reveal these truths” (82). And in order to communicate these truths, Welty relies first of all on language and its fictional capacity to more fully express life’s mysteries than the photographic, which must contend with its referent. For critic Elizabeth Meese, Welty’s creative process is made visible by looking at her photographs: “… the snapshots depict their creator’s discovery and subsequent creation of a reality larger than itself” (403). Hence, what is central to the courtyard photograph—the intersecting laundry lines and the interacting women and children—finds literary echoes on an equally small scale, but in a much louder tone, in Welty’s rendition of family dynamics in the story “Why I Live at the P. O.” Using the image of thunder, Welty expands on her photographic metaphor of the writer’s double vision in a description that resonates well with the auditory force of the story “Why I Live at the P. O.” Commenting on the writing of short stories in her essay “Writing and Analyzing a Story,” she says,

… subject, method, form, style, all wait upon—indeed hang upon—a sort of double thunderclap at the author’s ears: the break of the living world upon what is already stirring inside the mind, and the answering impulse that in a moment of high consciousness fuses impact and image and fires them off together.” (779-780)

The short story “Why I Live at the P. O.,” one of Welty’s most well-known stories, is also the most circular in form, with a high degree of energy in its condensed framing that corresponds well to Cortázar’s idea of the powerful short story. Critic Chouard describes Sister’s
monologue in the story as “noisy” and “furious,” and the text of the story as “furieusement
déjanté” (“furiously crazy”; Eudora Welty 51-52). Given Welty’s powers of visual observation, it
is not a coincidence that this compact story emerged from her discovery of an ironing board in
the window of a small-town post office.⁶⁹ What is noteworthy about how Welty remembers this
event is the fact that she saw the ironing board as an object framed by a window. The attention
critic Harriet Pollack draws to the importance of the framing of chance detail in Welty’s work
affirms the creative force of Welty’s observation of this ironing board in a window frame, and it
is a perfect illustration of Welty’s photographic eye: “…it is not surprising then that plot in her
work, like the art of photography itself, emphasizes disclosure, exposure of what—had it not
been framed and snapped by a click of a finger and a shutter—would have gone unseen”
(“Photographic Convention” 19). The image remembered by Welty that activates her story calls
to mind the suggestiveness of her snapshots and stories, whose surprising juxtapositions of the
unexpected and the uncanny are echoed in the curious presence of this domestic object in a
public space.

The framed enigma that triggers the story is thus reflected in the question of the title that
frames it. In a monologue, the narrator–protagonist called Sister tells the reader that she now
lives at the post office and proceeds to recall the events that drove her there one Fourth of July.
Although the reader is given a lively and somewhat tragicomic account, it is unclear why,
specifically, she decided to move into the P. O., and hence, the question of the story’s title
remains open for reader speculation. The story’s largest frame is its background: the small
southern town of China Grove with its few inhabitants, Sister’s home, and the post office. It is

⁶⁹ See the Welty interview with Jeanne Rolfe Nostrandt for her statement about seeing an ironing board in a post
office window and its impact as the trigger for the story.
also the site of the past arrival of an itinerant photographer from somewhere in the North, whose
actions are said to be the cause of the story’s remembered events. The middle frame of the story
is the Rondo household, the scene of the drama. The actual frame of the story is its smallest,
Sister’s memory of the events—that is, their fictional recreation. A day in the life of the Rondo
household, told by an angry narrator–protagonist, fills the scene of this story with a tension that
escalates to a breaking point that prompts Sister’s departure. The circular form of the story that
emerges from the recreation of the frenzied pace of the family’s dialogue in the vernacular is an
apposite example of the short story, defined by Cortázar, as a drop of water that, when seen
under a microscope, reveals innumerably moving, living beings.

The impression of constant motion in this story is felt in the very fast way the characters
talk, by quick retorts made to feel even faster by the use of the vernacular that tends to shorten
words and compress sentence structure. Furthermore, as soon as a conflict arises or is provoked,
a counterargument is given. When no resolution appears possible, another argument or clash is
immediately alluded to that builds on prior conflict, the whole constructed from the main point of
contention, that is, from the sisters’ past rivalry for the itinerant photographer whom both wanted
to seduce. The tempo of the story is set by the concatenation of sharp repartees that feed a
spiraling tension that nevertheless feels circular. For example, at the start of the story the
question of the adoption of Stella’s child, Shirley T., entangles Sister, Stella [her sister], and
Mama; when Sister questions the fact of the adoption indirectly with a “H’m” that infers that it is
a lie—something all understand but never admit—and then when Sister suggests that Shirley T.
looks like the grandfather if he were to cut off his beard, the argument moves and escalates
quickly to a new conflict between Sister and the grandfather. Even though the content of the
conflict changes, the dynamic evinced by the story’s vaudevillian dialogue remains the same.
Other aspects of the story contribute to its circularity and serve to strengthen the reader’s sense of a contained scenario about to explode. Sister states that the family lived in peace until the arrival of Stella and her child. But references to an age-old sibling rivalry as well as the revelation of Sister’s many conflicts with other family members suggest otherwise. Furthermore, Welty herself says in a 1980 interview with Charles Ruas, “Even though Sister goes and lives in the PO, she’ll probably be home by the weekend, and it could happen all over again” (63). Indeed, although she declares she is happy at the P. O., the fact that her family refuses to use the post office and that they are the main inhabitants of the town indicates that it could shut down for lack of business, thereby sending her back home. Additionally, in her telling of the events of the Fourth of July, and especially in the humorous moments of the reported dialogue, Sister’s tale shows that she enjoys the give-and-take, such that it would be hard to imagine her ever giving it up. Reading between the lines reveals a history of sibling rivalry, a post office threatened with closure, and pleasure in the narrating of this tragicomic family scene, three features that underscore the fictional construction of what seems at times to be a camera-like recording of a specific small-town family dynamic, the strangeness of which can at times feel familiar. Similarly, photography figures as the cause of the sisters’ conflicts, but in its more accepted documentary function as a revealer of truths, it fails and in the story figures more like a ruse: it brings dark moments to the surface—moments that remain as unresolved as why Sister has moved into the post office—and are, therefore, left to the reader to speculate on.

Lastly and in summary, Cortázar’s idea of sphericity is a way to describe how the fragmentary and concise aspect of the short story works to entrap the reader with enough force to change the reader’s experience of the world at large as a result of the emotional experience of reading the story. Whether the action is intense, tightly framed, and moving toward a breaking
point or whether a loose framing of anecdotal subject matter turns out to unveil hidden and dramatic motivating forces with explosive ramifications, the aim of the great short story, according to Cortázar, is ultimately to explosively and enduringly capture the reader’s imagination. In Rulfo’s stories, tension exists in the very first sentences and in his merging of poetic and everyday language; the framing, use of chiaroscuro, and the angles from which he takes his photographic images mobilize and confound viewers’ conventional ways of seeing photographs. The internal and gradual tension of Welty’s stories make the reader insecure and perplexed, as what seemed anecdotal becomes strange and inconclusive; her photographs appear at first sight to be regional documents from an earlier era, but, upon close inspection, the arrested gestures within the image attest to Welty’s dynamic understanding of social relationships and of how to depict them such that they critically interpellate the viewer. For Julio Cortázar, Juan Rulfo, and Eudora Welty, the explosive potential of short stories and photographs is what mobilizes the reader/viewer so that, from within, the fragmentary nature of stories and photographs constructed as tense spheres renewed and creative approaches to the world at large and to one’s own life experience are discovered.

EXPLOSIVE EFFECTS

In Cortázar’s writings on the short story, the metaphor of the story as the vision of the fully grown tree within its seed represents the critical potential of the story as the fragment’s relationship to the whole or the world at large, and this vision activates the possibility of an explosion that happens while reading, an explosion in which the desired effects seek to transform
the reader on a personal and social level. In photography, explosions occur when the viewer is compelled by the impact of the image to, on the one hand, look more closely at it, giving it words and context, and, on the other hand, to reflect on the photographic image as a fictional representation, that is, to become aware of its status as a manufactured object rather than seeing through it. Previously, Cortázar’s writer selected subject matter with potential for an intensity of atmosphere that—given the writer’s ability to powerfully shape that subject matter into a sphere containing the original energy of its creation—now has effects powerful enough to mobilize the reader. The story will explode and endure in the mind of the reader if it appears—like a photograph—as an independent work, and this requires eliminating, however possible, the explicit presence of its author. Only then, according to Cortázar, can the story have lasting effects.

According to Cortázar, like a photographic image, the exceptional short story must, in order to cause an explosive effect, become detached from its writer and begin a life of its own. He describes this third aspect of the construction of the short story, its explosive detachment from the writer, from the point of view of its effect on the reader: he or she must be made to believe that the short story wrote itself. He says, “El signo de un gran cuento me lo da eso que podríamos llamar su autarquía, el hecho de que el relato se ha desprendido del autor como una pompa de jabón de la pipa de yeso” (“For me the thing that signals a great story is what we might call its autonomy, the fact that it detaches itself from its author like a soap bubble from a clay pipe”; “Del cuento breve” 65; translation in “On the Short Story” 160). Photography critic Susan Sontag comments on the limits of authorial control in photography and confirms Cortázar’s insight when she says “the photographer’s intentions do not determine the meaning of the photograph which will have its own career, blown by the whims and loyalties of the diverse
communities that have use for it” (*Regarding the Pain of Others* 39). The independent life that Cortázar requires for the exceptional short story is inherent in a photograph, but it is a quality that, for a story, has to be carefully constructed.

Cortázar, Rulfo, and Welty seek a similar aim in their writing: the creation of a story that has no pre-established meaning or direction in order to coax the reader to participate in the act of writing, the reader is free, however, to accept or reject the challenge of becoming a co-producer. It has been suggested thus far that the effect on the viewer of many of Rulfo’s and Welty’s photographs is to challenge him or her to see and interpret the photographic image as a fictional work. However, the short story writer and the photographer must take different routes if they are to achieve a similar effect in both media. The question of the presence or absence of the writer or photographer is a key element in understanding how their paths diverge in the construction of a work of art that is meant to challenge the habitual responses of viewers and readers.

It is well known that the paradox of photography involves its dual nature. As document, it is irreducibly connected to its referent, a constraint that gives it the illusion of being a window on the world. At the same time, it is a manufactured artifact, a fiction. The fact that the photographic image deceives the viewer by seeming to be a mere objective capturing of the real serves to hide its fictional construction and its maker, the photographer. In order to invite the viewer to stop, discover, and interrogate the paradoxical nature of the photographic image, the photographer must somehow problematize its illusion of transparency. In the preface of his book, *Words of Light*, Eduardo Cadava notes, “What makes photography photography is not its capacity to present what it photographs but its character as a force of interruption” (xxviii). A stress on the photograph’s function as a breach in continuity can make the fictional nature of the photograph and its maker, the photographer, ‘visible.’ Consequently, the ‘visible’ presence of the
photographer in the construction of the image, his or her signature, underscores the fictionality of the image and critically challenges viewers’ common assumptions about photography.

Conversely, in the exceptional short story as defined by Cortázar and shared by Rulfo and Welty, the writer and/or omniscient narrator must disappear so that the story seems to have written itself. Paradoxically, however, the independence of the short story is dependent on the inordinate skill of a creator whose highly crafted absence results in a unique style or signature: the writer’s absence can hence be seen to make him or her more forcefully ‘present.’ In summary, in order to present a challenge to the reader or viewer, the short story writer must appear invisible whereas the photographer must highlight his or her constructive engagement with an objective referent; one requires the maker’s absence while the other requires the maker’s ‘presence.’

The intense ability of Rulfo’s and Welty’s photographs and short stories to engage viewers and readers stems from the fact that their creators seem to be both hesitatingly present and powerfully absent. The detachment of the short story from its writer requires, for Cortázar, the elimination of the writer. In an essay, “El desafío de la creación,” Rulfo also proposes expelling the author: “Una de las cosas más difíciles que me ha costado hacer, precisamente, es la eliminación del autor, eliminarme a mí mismo. Yo dejo que aquellos personajes funcionen por sí y no con mi inclusión …” (“What has been difficult and has cost me the most to do, specifically, is to eliminate the author, to eliminate myself. I let the characters act for themselves and I do not intervene…”; 384). While commenting on Chekhov’s short stories and the need to make the reader feel he or she is experiencing the narrated event, Welty declares that she seeks to minimize or eliminate the narrator to give the reader as direct an experience as possible: “In writing a story, it’s not I as a writer who wants to appear to be doing this, but the people of the story” (qtd. in Powell 182). Making the author disappear so that the characters can tell their own
stories and rejecting omniscient narrators goes hand in hand for Cortázar, Rulfo, and Welty with the radical elimination of explanations and superfluous descriptions. According to Rulfo, the writer’s presence in the story is an absence, a hanging thread to grasp or a gap for the reader to fill in. He states that reader participation is necessary in order to understand his stories: “Si el lector no coopera, no lo entiende; él tiene que añadirle lo que le falta … Siempre hay una participación muy cercana del lector con el libro y él se toma la libertad de ponerle lo que le falta. Eso a mi me gusta mucho (“If the reader does not co-create, he or she does not understand the work; the reader has to add what is missing … There is always a close engagement of the reader with the book and he or she takes the liberty of adding what the work needs. I like this idea very much”; “Juan Rulfo examina” 875). Welty’s stories also call for active and ongoing reader involvement. Critic Barbara Ladd and others have noted that Welty’s photographs and stories strongly impel viewers and readers to consider them again and again. Ladd writes, “The demand for reverie from the viewer, for the unfolding of meaning only as time passes and we continue to look and ponder, distinguishes Welty’s snapshots as it distinguishes her fiction” (Ladd 164).

To complete the description of how a short story should be constructed, Cortázar appeals again to photography. He alludes to a paradox in photography that he finds in the work of French photographers Cartier-Bresson and Brassaï. Cortázar defines this paradox as

… la de recortar un fragmento de realidad, fijándole determinados límites, pero de manera tal que ese recorte actúe como una explosión que abre de par en par una realidad mucho más amplia, como una visión dinámica que trasciende espiritualmente el campo abarcado por la cámara. (“Algunos aspectos” 385)
… that of cutting off a fragment of reality, giving it certain limits, but in such a way that this segment acts like an explosion which fully opens a much more ample reality, like a dynamic vision which spiritually transcends the space reached by the camera. (“Some Aspects” 246)

For Cortázar, the short story writer must, like the photographer, construct a story in which the very framing creates an opening, a rupture so intense that the reader is won over, abruptly and temporarily removed from the everyday. The reader is pulled into the story with the same intensity as both the narrator/narrator–protagonist whose experience it is and the writer who was possessed by a terrible and marvelous fascination with the story’s initial formless and haunting subject matter, even though at this stage the reader does not enter the writer’s mind. Paradoxically, it is what is explosively contained within the frame that prompts the reader to think beyond the narrative frame; in photography, when prompted to see and think beyond the visual frame, the viewer is urged to more pensively think about the impact of the image.

Explosions are experienced by participating in the enigmatic atmosphere of shifting dimensions of reality in the short story and by finding, in a photograph, something unusual and strange in the arrangement and appearance of what is in the frame; explosions are creative openings. Finally, to illustrate the impact that an exceptional short story should have on the reader, Cortázar uses an image from boxing that foregrounds and differentiates the lightening-like effect of the short story from that of the novel: the writer of the short story must win by knockout whereas the novelist will succeed by accumulating points (“Algunos aspectos” 385). A photograph must also attract the viewer’s gaze like lightening if it is to cause a lasting impression and forcefully prompt the viewer to express what the image itself cannot say.
Two photographs by Rulfo, Anciana de Apan, Hidalgo and Banda tirada en un campo verde (Fig. 4.5) and his short story, “El hombre,” will be discussed to explore how the effects desired by Cortázar for the short story and the photograph exist explosively in Rulfo’s work. Many critics have claimed that ambiguity is paramount in Rulfo’s visual and literary works. The enigmatic atmosphere of his art is what gives pause, confounds, and awakens interest in his extraordinary representations of ordinary subjects. In the words of short story writer Flannery O’Connor, Rulfo can be said to “make the concrete work double time” (98). It is his ability to hauntingly transfigure the everyday that gives his work the intensity of impact that, according to Cortázar, will “… actuar en el espectador o en el lector como una especie de apertura, de fermento que proyecta la inteligencia y la sensibilidad hacia algo que va mucho más allá de la anécdota visual o literaria contenidas en la foto o el cuento (“… act on the viewer or the reader as a kind of opening, an impetus which projects the intelligence and the sensibility toward something which goes well beyond the visual or literary anecdote contained in the photograph or the story”; “Algunos aspectos” 385; translation in “Some Aspects” 247).

To explore the effects of Rulfo’s photographic images, I contend that Barthes’s concept of the ‘punctum’ operates in a manner similar to what Cortázar calls openings. Writing in La chambre claire, Barthes states that all photographs have a ‘studium,’ which is the general interest the viewer manifests for a photograph that includes the knowledge brought to an understanding of the image and a recognition of the photographer’s intentions. In contrast, the ‘punctum’ is a detail for the viewer that unexpectedly flashes up from the scene depicted to disturb and prick his or her attention (71-95) The punctum is unintentional; it belongs to the domain of the ‘optical unconscious’ and to Cortázar’s fantastic realities that defy logic and rational control. And, like
Cortázar’s openings, the punctum has the power of expansion; it strikes the viewer with the effect of lightening and, at the same time, enlivens something that is static in the photograph by tapping deeply into the viewer’s feelings and/or experiences. The punctum interrupts, disturbs, and changes the viewer’s reading of the photograph as it enters into a tense relationship with the photograph’s studium.

_Anciana de Apan, Hidalgo (“Old woman from Apan, Hidalgo”)_ is the environmental portrait of an older peasant woman all dressed in black who sits in front of a house in a village where three other women, one barely visible, can be seen behind her (Fig. 4.5). The figure of the old woman pops out of the image, first, because of the intense contrast between her lit face and hands and her black shawl and dress; second, because she is in focus whereas the other female figures and houses are blurry; and third, because she is so close to the camera that she appears larger than anything else in the photograph. It is the harsh light of a bright late morning or early afternoon sun beaming down on her that creates contrasts and the deep shadow covering her eyes. Another perplexing long shadow extends discretely over the right edge of her dress and shawl; it appears to be the photographer’s shadow and indicates that he is taking her picture at an angle facing left. For Raventos-Pons, this photograph, like the others in _Inframundo_, is an example of how Rulfo complicates the viewer’s task and forces him or her to dwell on the image because of the effects of the contrasts between light and darkness (406). These effects magnify the woman’s deep wrinkles and the sadness in her eyes, giving the image a strangely powerful, expressive quality that evokes the harshness of her life.

What is strange and unsettling in this photograph is the long shadow of the photographer that is projected onto the woman’s dark clothing. It isn’t noticeable at first because the eye is attentive to a bright white rock next to her that casts a shadow that looks like it might also be
hers. The shadow of the photographer draws a line leftwards in a diagonal, starting with the shadow itself, as it appears imprinted on the old woman’s clothing and ends in a direction that points to her shaded eyes. The punctum, which is for me the accidental shadow of the photographer, opens this image in two directions. On the one hand, the unforeseen appearance of the photographer as shadow seems to uncannily defeat Rulfo’s principle that the writer should be eliminated from the fictional work, and, indeed, he manages not to be physically present in most of his photographs. Here, however, his discrete and unintended presence is a piercing reminder that all photographs are fictional constructions. On the other hand, the shadow points to the main ambiguity of the photograph: the uncertain direction of the old woman’s gaze. Raventos-Pons believes the old woman’s gaze is directed at the viewer, which, for Raventos-Pons, suggests her defiant refusal to being caught—here by the camera, there, perhaps, by poverty and despair. But, a closer inspection reveals that the old woman’s eyes can also be seen to look away from the photographer and viewer. Highlighted by the photographer’s shadow, the other direction of her gaze, looking away from the camera, signals indifference to the camera’s presence and gives another meaning to her gesture.

In a discussion of Rulfo’s fiction, William Rowe notes that the emotional entrapment of Rulfo’s characters, most of which face miserable social conditions, is manifest in their attitudes of indifference. He suggests that indifference is a way for these characters to face oppression without letting anger destroy them and without having to identify with those who oppress them (243-244). Anciana de Apan’s indifference to the camera is an act of silent resistance: she lets the viewer see but she does not yield to being captured. The ambivalence in her attitude, expressed by the unclear direction of her gaze—that is, the impossibility of knowing whether she is looking straight at or away from the viewer—confounds the viewer and attracts him or her.
forcefully into the image in the manner of Cortázar’s boxing metaphor, as in a victory by knockout.

_Banda tirada en un campo verde (“Wall thrown across a green field”)_ is the image of an undulating adobe wall that runs across the frame from right to left (Fig. 4.5). The eye encounters it in media res on the right and then follows it toward the horizon. Running parallel to the wall, a dirt path ends with it at a small point in the horizon where a tiny dark shadow stands that looks like a tree. The photograph of the wall is taken at a low angle, which makes it appear huge and shows it to block the view of anything that lies behind it. The bright, harsh noonday sun admits no shadows and sharply highlights the symmetrically organized adobe bricks that seem like layered scales, making the movement of the wall feel like that of a serpent. The radiant sunlight distorts the relationship between the earth and the sky: the dirt path is very bright whereas the cloudless sky, habitually the source of light, is dark. This uncannily lit scene suggests the dryness and infertility of the land and the ominous skies one finds in Rulfo’s stories.

Like _Anciana de Apan, Hidalgo_, the image of the wall ropes in the viewer because of the tensions and ambiguities created by the photographer’s skilled use of light, scale, and composition. The wall dramatically conceals what is behind it, all the while pointing to a tiny opening at the horizon. It fills the frame, showing the viewer each brick in detail with such intensity that it feels massive and static, in striking contrast to its movement as it undulates toward the horizon, looking very much alive. The imposing scale of the undulating wall and its ancient construction dominate and give unity to contrasts in the image such as the straight dirt road and the serpentine wall. However, a detail, a small white piece of garbage, perhaps paper or cloth or plastic, at the foot of the wall toward the right side of the frame punctures the aesthetic unity of the image. It appears to be caught in a dry shrub and, if it were not for the fact that the
eye is drawn to it because of its whiteness, it might go unnoticed. The object, the trace of someone who passed through, underscores the imposing fixity of what is portrayed in the photograph. The piece of garbage—unintentionally part of the photograph and for me its punctum—could simply refer to the act of littering. But I see it as a discarded plastic bag that can suggest, because of its contemporary nature, tension between old and new ways of life and between the fixed and the temporary or ephemeral.

The bright modern piece of discarded plastic at the base of the country wall foregrounds the old age of the wall by highlighting the layered placement of each brick, thereby expanding the reading of what is in the photograph. As Barthes states in *La chambre claire*, “Si fulgurant qu’il soit, le punctum a, plus ou moins virtuellement, une force d’expansion” (“However lightening-like it may be, the punctum has, more or less potentially, a power of expansion”; 74; translation in *Camera Lucida* 45). The simple country wall fixed in this image comes to life and points to something beyond its frame: its patterned bricks can be seen to recall the more ancient Mexican pyramids, bringing into play the pre-Columbian, colonial, and modern eras. The movement caused by the interplay of studium and punctum described in the two photographs—*Anciana de Apan, Hidalgo* and *Banda tirada en un campo verde*—suggests the interaction of contrasting forms in musical keys. The most appropriate way to begin a discussion of Rulfo’s short story, “El hombre” (“The Man”), is to think of it as a fugue, a continual interweaving of voice parts in contrast to its stark title, which functions like an echo to the straightforward captions of his photographs.

The first and longest part of “El hombre” works like a fugue: an enigmatic and omniscient narrator tells the story of a man hunted by another man in the third person. The tale in the narrator’s voice is continuously interrupted by two other voices: the narrator’s descriptions of
the fleeing man’s state of mind—in the man’s own words, occasionally—and the direct words of the pursuer as reported by the narrator. The repetitious nature of what the hunter and hunted think or say—like repetition in a fugue—convey in the telling of this story the feeling of strange loops. Furthermore, a river, deceptively pointing to a way out for the hunted man, embodies the entrapment of the characters in a fatal circularity; the river also echoes the reader’s oscillation and bewilderment. Time moves forward and backward, seemingly at a standstill, like the river rocking to and fro. The narrator says, “Muy abajo el rio corre mullendo sus aguas entre sabinos florecidos; meciendo su espesa corriente en silencio. Camina y da vueltas sobre sí mismo. Va y viene como una serpentina enroscada sobre la tierra verde” (“Far below, the river flows, its waters lapping at the flowering cypresses, rocking its thick current in silence. It twists and turns upon itself. It winds like a serpent coiled on the green earth”; Rulfo, “El hombre” 43; translation in The Burning Plain 35).

“El hombre” is a simple story told in a manner that puts the reader into its pressurized cycle of violence and death from the very first sentences. It is a story about murder and revenge that begins ambiguously: the hunted man, Jose Alcancia, could be on his way to commit murder, but the reader feels that this moment could also be what happens after the murders because of the references to Alcancia’s animal-like footprint, to his difficult climb looking for the horizon, and because, in the next paragraph, the words of the hunter, Urquidi, make it seem like he is directly behind him. The reader, who enters the story in media res, is led to think that the chase has already begun; the confusion about the timing of the beginning sets in later. By the end, we learn that Urquidi murdered Alcancia’s brother before the beginning of the story. Alcancia, who is looking to avenge his brother by murdering Urquidi, arrives at night and murders the whole family, not knowing that Urquidi is not there. Urquidi chases him and eventually shoots him.
Reading this short story, the reader is catapulted into a situation full of contrasts, contradictions, uncertainties, and disconcerting gaps, such as the lack of information on how and why this cycle of murders began. The reader feels he or she has been dropped into this world and, once enmeshed, can find no guideposts to help make sense of this living inferno. In a second, shorter part, there is a sudden shift that is not immediately graspable: a new narrator–protagonist tells the story in the first person and in the present tense. To further confound the reader, what seems to be a monologue turns out to be the testimony of the narrator–protagonist who is telling his story to a silent interlocutor. This eyewitness narrator is a naïve shepherd who befriends and helps Alcancia during the last moments of the chase. Trapped, and obliged to retrace his steps, Alcancia is killed. The narrator/shepherd finds the dead body and alerts the authorities. It is learned at the end that the narrator/shepherd has become a victim; he is telling his story to a judge who condemns him for harboring Alcancia. “El hombre” is a highly condensed and twisting narrative replete with tension and ambiguity. A single event, murder and revenge, is amplified by the interweaving of moments of remorse felt by the fleeing man, who remembers the scene of his crime, and by the authoritarian claims of the man who is chasing him. This juxtaposition of points of view causes the reader to oscillate uneasily between a murder that has happened and one that is about to happen. Rulfo’s refusal to direct the reader in this story points to what Cortázar calls the story’s autarky, its detachment from its creator.

Rulfo successfully eliminates himself from this story. Even though the first narrator is omniscient, his point of view never appears external to the story: he offers no judgments and is suggestive rather than explanatory, leaving the reader ample space to participate. It is the narrator who interrupts the narrative in the first part by quoting Urquidi and describing Alcancia’s thoughts, thereby concealing the writer’s role more completely. Finally, the generic title creates
even more distance between the story and its writer. The title seems to refer to the anguished Alcancia, but nothing makes this explicit; again, the question is left for the reader to answer.

In his analysis of this story, critic Marcelo Coddou claims that it illustrates Cortázar’s concepts of exceptional subject matter, sphericity, and the creation of openings that point to meaningful realities beyond the story itself. Inspired by Cortázar, Coddou’s main argument is that this story shows how a single event presented dramatically, as Rulfo does using a minimum amount of resources for maximum effect, can encompass a much larger reality. He says, “Importa hacer notar desde ya que ese acontecimiento conduce siempre en Rulfo a una apertura hacia dimensiones relevantes y significativas de la vida del hombre” (“It is important to already note that this event always leads the reader of Rulfo’s text to an opening toward dimensions that are relevant and significant in the life of man”; 776). For Coddou, this larger reality is the contradictory and desperate situation of man in the modern world, his alienation. The reader is made to experience this alienation and/or lack of freedom in a story such as “El hombre,” where the uncertain reality of the characters mirrors the uncertainty experienced by the reader, who must disentangle the different parts of the story in order to understand and appreciate it. There is no exit for the characters of “El hombre,” and there is no easy way to grasp this story once one has accepted the challenge of Rulfo’s opaque and undecipherable worlds. In a similar manner, the descriptive and enigmatic images, *Anciana de Apan, Hidalgo* and *Barda tirada en un campo verde*, bewilder the viewer while, at the same time, they invite him or her to interrogate the image and, in so doing, to consider new and unexpected meanings drawn from personal experiences. Likewise, Eudora Welty’s stories and photographs unsettle, make inordinate demands on readers and viewers, and, in so doing, create openings for reader and viewer participation.
EUDORA WELTY

Two photographs by Welty, one published in her book *Eudora Welty: Photographs*, *Ruins of Windsor/Port Gibson/1942* (Fig. 4.6), and the other, *Hypnotist, State Fair/Jackson*, published in *One Time, One Place* (Fig. 4.7), as well as two related images, *Home after High Water/Rodney* (Fig. 4.6.1) and *Sideshow, State Fair/Jackson/1939* (not shown), are photographs in which viewing generates the expansive and explosive effects Cortázar defines as attributes of the great short story. Similar explosive effects and openings are discussed in her short story “Powerhouse,” following the commentary on the photographs. In her preface to *One Time, One Place*, Welty connects her photographic practice to her story writing, indicating that a story might be a longer, more in-depth contemplation of what one might see captured in a snapshot. The short story aims, then, to render differently what it captures, what “… never stops moving, never ceases to express for itself something of our common feeling” (Welty, *One Time, One Place* 12). It is suggested here that contemplating her photographs involves more than a momentary glimpse: intense feelings arise for the viewer of her photographs because of how they capture the interactions of the human figures depicted as if in mid-sentence. The portrayal of the moment in-between suggests the before and after of the movement or gesture; the capture of intersecting looks suggests relationships and conversation. Like her stories, the provocative effects of her photographs are due to the dense gestures captured in her framings and their capacity to create openings.

Explosive effects are meant to transfer power from the photographer to the viewer and, for the short story, from the writer onto the reader. They are, as noted by Cortázar for the short story, transformative moments for the reader that signal that the story has embarked on a life of its own, a life that is established when the reader becomes a co-creator. A photograph, by its
nature, stands alone as a slice of the world at large. Its frame is full of elements, it might have a caption, and it is presented in a variety of possible contexts. The publication of Welty’s photographs in a first book where she discusses the relationship between her photographic and literary experience (One Time, One Place) and in a second book where a lengthy interview about her involvement with photography and literature serves as an introduction (Eudora Welty: Photographs), constitute a context wherein the two media are interrelated. Thus, a discussion of effects that arise by relating photographs and stories not only reaffirms Cortázar’s ideas about the short story and photography but also sheds light on the particular engagement solicited from the reader/viewer of Welty’s works. The first photograph discussed, Ruins of Windsor, demands, by its punctum-like effects, subjective responses from its viewers; the analysis of the second image, Hypnotist, State Fair, demonstrates that what is in the image itself forces upon the viewer a heightened awareness of what is out of the frame, and the impossibility of knowing what is out of the frame urges renewed attention to what is within, signaling the photograph’s fictionality. The effects of the punctum, its capacity to draw attention to what is out of the field of the image and its interrogation of the studium, strongly compel viewers to project words and perhaps stories onto this mute, albeit intense, photographic image.

The presence of the photographer’s shadow in Ruins of Windsor/Port Gibson/1942 (Fig. 4.6) invites the viewer to meditate on the constructed and manipulated nature of the photograph. The photograph Ruins of Windsor depicts a dirt road leading to a large ruin where many of the outer columns are left standing and have been so for a long time, given the fact that bushes and trees are seen to grow out of the tops of the columns. We know it is Mississippi, a region of the state whose places are the background of her short stories and where Welty took most of her photographs. Given these facts, the ruin recalls an abandoned plantation whose imposing stature
in the photograph contrasts with the dirt road that leads up to it and with its existence in the image as the shell of what it once was. The photograph *Ruins of Windsor* is particularly striking because it prominently shows the shadow of Welty in the position from which she takes the picture, facing the ruined structure, looming large and visibly looking down into her Rolleiflex because of the position of her arms. Welty’s shadow presence is all the more striking because of her insistence on her invisibility in both stories and photographs. In fact, in her preface to *One Time, One Place*, she argues that her invisibility among Mississippians is what makes the images in that book unique and powerful. She writes, “… he [outsider/photographer] could hardly have been as well positioned as I was, moving through the scene openly and yet invisible because I was part of it, born into it, taken for granted” (9). Her desire to be invisible is confirmed by the fact that this photograph is one of only three images from either *Eudora Welty: Photographs* or *One Time, One Place* in which the viewer can glimpse her shadow presence.70

The punctum-like effect of the accidental inclusion of the photographer’s shadow—perhaps intended by the printer of the image in 1989 and specifically chosen for *Eudora Welty: Photographs*—leads to a strange coincidence when it is compared to a similar image of the same ruined structure in *One Time, One Place*, the one without Welty’s shadow image. Entitled *Home after High Water/Rodney* (Fig. 4.6.1), it depicts the same ruin from exactly the same angle. Although Welty’s shadow is not visible in this image, it is impossible to say without seeing the negative whether or not there was originally a shadow that was cropped out of this photographic print. Hence, although on first impression it looks like these images come from the same negative and that Welty’s shadow has been eliminated in the one in *One Time, One Place*, when

70 Two examples are *Town in Store Window/Canton* (*One Time, One Place* 56) and *Lanterns/Canton/c1936* (*Eudora Welty: Photographs* 67)
comparing the two images it seems more likely that they are two images of the same structure taken from the same position at different times. In the image from the book *Eudora Welty: Photographs*, Welty’s shadow highlights and points to a dark spot next to the ruin, which appears to be an animal grazing. When compared to the photograph of the ruin without the photographer’s shadow (*One Time, One Place*), the spot is the very small and dark figure of a horse against the white of the structure and serves, in its clear definition and difference, as conclusive evidence that these prints were made from different negatives. In the barren landscape of these images, the small dark figure of a horse also gives the viewer an acute sense of scale: up against the structure, the small figure of the horse barely reaches the base of the columns that are left standing, making this image appear as that of a monumental ruin. In essence, innumerable questions are raised by these two images that seemed at first sight to be different prints of one negative and by the enigma of whether the shadow presence of the photographer was erased in one of them: these questions underline the ambiguities and uncertainties that arise when viewing these images.

If the photographer’s shadow was erased in 1971 (*One Time, One Place*), why was an image similar to the one in 1971 selected for the book *Eudora Welty: Photographs* in 1989 that shows Welty’s shadow front and center? Was Welty the printer of the *One Time, One Place* images? If so, the erasure is consistent with her remarks about the invisibility of the writer-photographer and, if she did not print the image, her involvement with this book suggests her agreement. Is this the case for the second book? By 1989, had conceptions of photography changed so that it was fashionable to include the photographer as shadow in the image, unlike

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71 The Cole and Srinavasan interview with Welty that introduces her photo book, *Eudora Welty: Photographs*, reveals that she did print many of her images in the early years of her photographic practice, indicating her knowledge of the process (xiii-xvi).
the image from the 1971 book, where the shadow seems cropped out? The confusion generated by the divergence in the captions of these sister images comes up: is the ruin in Rodney or is it in Port Gibson? Is it a ruined home or a Windsor ruin? Finally, the horse: when it is clearly visible, there is no shadow presence of the photographer in the picture, perhaps making the image a more transparent and dramatic scene of a destroyed past; when the horse is barely recognizable, the dramatic sense of scale is lost and the prominence of the photographer’s shadow changes the effects of the photograph in ways that underscore the present capture of a ruined past. What light might the following description of the photographed scene shed on the image itself? In her essay “Some Notes on River Country,” Welty writes with no reference to her early photograph,

“Set back in an old gray field, with horses grazing like small fairy animals beside it, is a vast ruin—twenty-two Corinthian columns in an empty oblong and an L. Almost seeming to float like lace, bits of wrought iron balcony connect them here and there. Live cedar trees are growing from the iron black acanthus leaves, high in the empty air.” (762)

Welty’s ephemeral, haunting, and poetic description contrasts with the more harsh and dramatic photographic depiction. Ultimately, the more questions that are seen to emerge from this photograph and its ‘double,’ and from juxtaposing it to Welty’s writings, the more obvious is the power of Welty’s photographs to contain intense effects that expand their meanings beyond their frames in a manner that implicates the viewer’s imaginative and critical faculties.

The second photographic image defined in this section by its ability to expand beyond its frame and to actively involve the reader appears in One Time, One Place with the caption Hypnotist, State Fair/Jackson (Fig. 4.7). It is published again in 1989 in Eudora Welty: Photographs in a slightly different framing and with a new caption. This image is a close-up
portrait of three young white boys looking intently toward the image’s frame at the left and thus at something not depicted nor alluded to in the photograph itself. The viewer is immediately drawn to the photograph’s title for an explanation but is instead more puzzled: the boys do not seem to be mesmerized and they are not in the usual position of one being hypnotized. Surely, the title could be metaphoric and they could be riveted to something the viewer does not see but could imagine at a state fair, given the caption. Or, the viewer, as a reader of Welty’s stories, might imagine connections to the odd occurrences at state fairs and the interruptions of the everyday caused by strangers, entertainers, or photographers who pass through small towns.

Unlike a more tightly cropped image from the same negative published in *Eudora Welty: Photographs* (139), this one includes blurred background objects that make more noticeable the clear definition of the three boys depicted and that strengthen the intensity of their looking and posing gestures. The boys’ soiled clothing indicates that they are farmers’ children and the detailed depiction of their faces and clothes is rendered even starker and more intense by the contrast with the image’s background of blurred sideshow posters and the barely discernable figure of a woman walking toward them from afar.

The photograph *Hypnotist, State Fair* is placed to the right of another state fair image that might give the viewer a clue about what the boys are looking at. The juxtaposed image is titled *Side Show State Fair/Jackson (One Time, One Place)* 78. In this image, a man at a microphone seems to be announcing something, probably the sideshow, and he is surrounded by a few people, some in costume, on a platform. He, too, looks to the left of the photographic frame, but unlike the missing object of the boys’ looks, he is clearly addressing an audience, albeit invisible. The audience is suggested by the platform, the microphone, those on the platform who might speak, and the placement of the platform in front of the posters publicizing the different
sideshow events. The background context of the image that contains three boys looking—the blurred posters in the background—becomes a marker of the fair when it is juxtaposed to the clearly identifiable posters in the adjacent picture and to the title that explains the scene. Although this comparison gives a clue to the context, it does not evoke or specify what they might be looking at, nor does it makes sense of the hypnotist in the photograph’s title; what they are looking at remains a mystery.

Photographic images where human figures are depicted looking at something outside of the frame are common in Welty’s photography. It is perhaps due to her predilection for taking photographs when her subjects were unaware. She writes, “It will be evident that the majority of them [photographs] were snapped without the awareness of the subjects or with only their peripheral awareness” (One Time, One Place 9). This framing brings to mind the photograph in its relationship to what is left out of the image. Theoretician of photography Philippe Dubois’s idea of the photograph as a spatiotemporal cut, one that establishes an automatic and inevitable relation between the photograph itself and what is outside of the frame, as well as a relationship to the space and time of the viewer, is particularly helpful to grasp the manner in which photographs can expand beyond their frames and involve the viewer (169). As a temporal cut, photography immobilizes and interrupts; as a spatial cut, it fragments, cutting out a piece of space. In L’acte photographique, Dubois states that the paradox of photography as a temporal cut is that, by its deathlike capture of the living, it makes disappear what it seeks to preserve. Spatially, the enclosed field of the photographic image is, unlike that of painting or writing,
already full. By cutting a slice from the visible world out there, the photograph—as a cut in space—points, virtually, to what is absent and contiguous (160-169). Many of Welty’s photographs depict human beings looking toward and seemingly out of the frame at something not depicted or explicitly suggested. This feature is discussed by critic Harriet Pollack, who suggests that the oblique look of these figures feels like the mysteries left unresolved in Welty’s stories. Pollack looks at a photograph of two women during their rest period in a mattress factory and suggests that both their off-center position in the image and the way they look beyond the frame brings into the image a sense of the burdens of their life circumstances and, furthermore, that the incompleteness of this kind of image gives it the mysterious quality often found in Welty’s short stories (“Photographic Convention” 24-26).

The oblique portrayal of human beings and Welty’s depiction of them as they look at what the viewer cannot see forcefully redirects the viewer back to the enigmatic image. Following the looks of the photographed figures that land haltingly on the frame and understanding that these interrupted looks are gestures that cannot be completed thwarts the viewer’s tendency to see the photograph as a window on the world. Lacking an understanding of the real world context that surrounds the image, the viewer must look back and examine the enigmatic photograph in search of details or clues, not as explanations but as creative inspiration. As suggested by Dubois’s idea of the photograph as a spatial cut, the explosive effects of these photographs leads to an oscillation between the enigmatic image and the viewer’s imagination, an oscillation that characterizes the involvement of the viewer as co-creator. This oscillation between what is out of the frame and what is within can be seen to characterize the oscillations experienced by the reader of Welty’s story “Powerhouse” between its two main scenes: the white dance hall and the black World Café.
Welty’s short story “Powerhouse” has generated critical commentary from a variety of points of view, and when asked to clarify this or that story situation, Welty remained elusive in her responses. As a verbal portrayal of jazz and blues improvisation, Welty’s story is more richly interpreted by those who can read between the lines. The story’s title, “Powerhouse,” embodies in one word Cortázar’s notion of the short story as contained energy: its tension is expressed in the ambiguities revealed by the positioning of the narrator and by the main character’s skillful manipulation of language. As such, this story fulfills Welty’s—and Cortázar’s—idea that the story must be detached from its writer and an independent entity in order to exert potentially explosive effects on its readers. Like Cortázar, who describes his authorial independence from a story by stating metaphorically that both he and his story stand on opposite shores of a river ("Del cuento breve" 65-66), Welty seeks a similar distance from her stories to know that they are complete: she says in a 1988 interview with Hermione Lee, “… I can’t really feel a story is finished until I can stand off from it and see it objectively” (152). The autarkic nature of this short story is embodied in its title; in its main character, a musician and storyteller; and in its theme, musical improvisation.

The musician Powerhouse is described as having unbridled energy, but at the same time, he has a sense of limits. Powerhouse’s frenetic energy is depicted at the start of the story in the narrator’s descriptions: “... his mouth is going every minute ...”; “Big arched eyebrows that never stop traveling ...”; “He is in motion every moment” (Welty, “Powerhouse” 158). Further into the story, when conversing with a band member, Powerhouse says, “I don’t carry around nothing without limits” (163). Movement within the frame of the story is evinced in its central theme, musical improvisation, which is free play within a given structure—here, a song. And because in jazz a song can be transformed from inside while retaining its ‘frame,’ tension is
maintained between outer and inner in such a way that the listener must work hard to discover
either what has actually been changed or the meaning of the proposed variations and their frame-
breaking capacities.

Improvisation is, thus, an activity that appears as movement within a frame that generates
intensity from the oscillations between variations and theme that stand as a challenge to the
listening audience. For example, in the story, the only song that Powerhouse will play on request
is a waltz called “Pagan Love Song.” While playing it he invents a story about his wife’s death
and, as quickly as he declares this, he changes the tempo of the song and beings to improvise.
The fact that he has to switch venues and move to an African American setting to engender and
explore variations on his story suggests that his white audience is unaware of what he is doing
and, by its juxtaposition to the first scene, this change of venue makes manifest the existence of
layered meanings in the story.

Powerhouse is the name of the story’s central character, a piano player, bandleader, and
storyteller who is encountered by the reader as he plays in a white dance hall on a rainy night in a
small Mississippi town. Before intermission and upon receiving and accepting an audience
request for a waltz he dislikes, Powerhouse, in the midst of the song, tells the musicians a story
that begins with a telegram announcing the death of his wife. The story sets off the change in
tempo that will trigger variations on the theme that will be developed as the band leaves the
white hall during intermission and goes to a café in the black part of town, followed by black
admirers “… coming around from under the eaves of the hall …” (163). Powerhouse’s story and
the numerous variations that emerge from spontaneous collective interactions in the café comes
to an end with a telegram Powerhouse composes in response. The band returns to the white
dance hall and the short story ends with a rhetorical question to the audience and readers, “…
Maybe it’s you!” (170). His furious grimace as he mouths these words speaks to his lack of communication with the audience, but the final statement itself poignantly addresses the reader.

The meanings of this story have emerged progressively and most certainly due to a fuller exploration of its borrowings from jazz and the blues. What Welty says in general about the evolving meanings of a story applies particularly well to “Powerhouse.” In the essay “Looking at Short Stories,” Welty writes, “Some stories leave a train of light behind them, meteor like, so that much later than they strike our eyes we may see their meaning like an aftereffect” (88). Early critics such as Smith Kirkpatrick analyze the story as a demonstration of the transformation of life into art and Powerhouse, the character, as an embodiment of the love and selflessness that drive the making of art. The story Powerhouse invents is seen as an example of how life can be turned into a story that inspires music making (Kirkpatrick 102-103). Other jazz critics, like Whitney Balliett, have used Welty’s story as an illustration of the life of Fats Waller (Balliett 111-112). Balliett and most other critics of this story agree that it stems from a Fats Waller performance that Welty used to write this story. Critic Thomas H. Getz moves beyond equating the story to a Waller performance and reads “Powerhouse” as if he were listening to a jazz performance. Like Kirkpatrick, he notes an emphasis on how making is shown in the story to shape art and life, but his main stress is on Welty’s ability to make the reader feel Powerhouse’s physical body as he performs (40). Getz calls Welty’s story a verbal improvisation inspired by the practice of improvisation in jazz and especially by its fantastic and imaginative play, a feature he finds in how the story brings literary fiction into musical fiction (44). It is suggested that Powerhouse creates the story in order to make the audience feel the music. Welty’s early depictions of Powerhouse, as well as the many variations on the theme of his wife’s suicide, are described by Getz as displays of verbal improvisation. Getz also contrasts the story’s two main
scenes, the white dance hall and the World Café, to highlight the fact that the merging of the literary and the musical are fully communicated only to the audience in the café.

Two more-recent critics, Leland H Chambers and Kenneth Bearden, probe more deeply into the connections between storytelling and jazz and into African American culture. Chambers is emphatic in stating that this story is the most successful verbal representation of jazz improvisation (54). His focus is on how Welty merges jazz improvisation with mythmaking and on how she manages to evoke improvisation in and through Powerhouse’s own story and its improvisations. Furthermore, the fact that Powerhouse draws from the responses of his musicians and others to tell his story reflects the collective nature of jazz improvisation. Like Getz, Chambers acknowledges that the spontaneous and playful variations on the main theme can only occur in the World Café, between the musicians and an admiring black audience that is well versed in the practice of language manipulation and mythmaking (59-63). Bearden, who, unlike other critics, finds this story unusual and very different from Welty’s other stories, adds ambiguity and the presence of ‘signifying’ to his discussion of improvisation and the blues as well as jazz. Among the many ambiguities in the story caused by Powerhouse’s words and actions, Bearden suggests that the main one involves Powerhouse’s creation of life—his music and stories—with death (37). Bearden simultaneously reminds us that this ambiguity is at the heart of the blues and, hence, of the African American experience. Unsure about the degree of Welty’s knowledge of the idea of the “signifying monkey,”73 he nevertheless suggests that she may have deliberately given Powerhouse this quality, given her descriptions of him as a monkey in the beginning and because of how she highlights his ability to play on the confusion of literal...

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73 See Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s *The Signifying Monkey: a Theory of African American Literary Criticism* for an appreciation of the extensive cultural significance of this character, known as a trickster in African American culture and believed to originate in African vernacular culture.
and figurative language to trick his naïve white audience, an activity that is typical of the “signifying monkey” and of the African American experience (40).

Bearden gives numerous examples to ground Welty’s use of ‘signifying’ in this story, ending with a fact that other critics have not written about before: he tells us that the original ending for this story was rejected by Welty’s editors and that she had to change it. The original ending involved the sexually suggestive lyrics of a song, “Hold Tight,” that was not understood by the white audience although the song was made immensely popular by whites (44-5). For Bearden, Welty must have known about the controversy and why the editors rejected her first ending. He ends his critique with this powerful example to show that performers such as Powerhouse (or Waller) were aware of the controversies engendered by the lyrics of their songs and of the naïveté of their audiences and, consequently, took on the role of the trickster or “signifying monkey” to laugh at the expense of their audience in partial assuagement for the pain and anger caused by racism. Bearden suggests that the narrator does not hear the play on words when he or she calls “Pagan Love Song” a sad song, thereby missing the irony of Powerhouse’s sexual gestures during his performance of the song and not hearing its sacred and profane tonalities (44). The position of the narrator in the story and his or her inability to seize the figurative dimension of the musicians’ language is confusing, especially when, as Bearden notes, the writer shows deep knowledge of African American culture, knowledge that escapes the grasp of her narrator.

The narrator’s unreliability—given, on the one hand, his or her racist remarks and, on the other hand, an attention to detail that evinces sharp awareness of racial discrimination, such as the indictment of Southern racism in the remark on Powerhouse’s use of a towel from a Northern
hotel—complicates matters and makes inordinate demands on readers. Another example that baffles is that the narrator is able to recall and report the improvisation session at the World Café as if she or he belonged to the audience in the café and, yet, this ‘invisible’ fly on the wall of the café is most likely the only white person in the room. The enigmas that this story poses to its critics, the diverse points of view from which it is read and its ambiguities, attests to its openness and to its demand on readers. The levels and shades of meaning in the story “Powerhouse” constitute the challenge that Welty poses to the reader: critic Marrs suggests this when she calls Welty’s concept of fiction “… the possibility of a shared act of the imagination between its [fiction’s] writer and its reader” (Marrs 78). Powerhouse’s statement at the end of the story is addressed to his white audience, with whom, as the story makes clear, he cannot communicate. Hence, the story’s closure is more significantly both a plea for communication with the reader and a question to ponder that sends the reader right back into the story. The actual closure of this short story is the end of Powerhouse’s performance; it begins and ends in a white dance hall, a frame with political dimensions that limits but does not stifle the musician’s art. Since the story is a verbal representation of jazz and blues improvisation, with its layering of variations upon a theme and its playful language twists, it is always open to more interpretation and to the imagination of more variations as the history of its criticism shows. As Welty remarks in “Looking at Short Stories,” “There is sure to be somewhere a reader, who is a user himself of imagination and thought, who knows, perhaps as much about the need of communication as the writer” (106). As Powerhouse and his friends improvise, they give shape to their music and their story. Concurrently, in Welty’s writing about fiction, the shape of a story is formed as the writer

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74 When Powerhouse wipes his face, we are told it is with a towel from a hotel in the North. As is well known in this period, African Americans could not stay in hotels in the South; hence, this comment indirectly references Jim Crow in the fictional town of Alligator.
writes and as the reader reads (“Words into Fiction” 143-144). Like the creation of music in “Powerhouse,” the interpretation of Welty’s photographs demands active looking: the viewer probes the image more deeply, finds in its details or framing occasion for creative commentary, and discovers new meanings both from within and from collective experience.

Explosive effects, the enlightening impact of great short stories and photographs on readers and viewers, are key features of both Rulfo’s and Welty’s stories and photographs. These effects are, for Cortázar, the conditions necessary for the short story to challenge its readers and to demand their participation as co-creators. When juxtaposed to their stories, Rulfo and Welty’s photographs make similar demands on viewers. Ambiguities, contradictions, and the withholding of information in Rulfo’s story “El hombre” engage the reader by displacing and estranging him or her. Uncertainties in the photograph Anciana de Apan Hidalgo are highlighted by the shadow presence of the photographer, prompting the viewer to reflect on the photograph’s construction. Similarly, an unintended detail in the photograph of a rural wall is seen to disturb its aesthetic composition in ways that opens it up for further speculation. Welty’s story “Powerhouse” is photographically constructed as the juxtaposition of two main scenes wherein oscillations and internal movement animated by musical and verbal improvisation exemplify Cortázar’s sphericity, defined as motion at a standstill on various levels, and, as such, meets the conditions said to provoke openings for the reader. Like the musician’s frame-breaking intrusion into the white community of the story, the ideal short story for Cortázar must provoke a break in habitual routines. Cortázar states, “A story is meaningful when it ruptures its own limits with that explosion of spiritual energy which suddenly illuminates something far beyond that small … anecdote …” (“Some Aspects” 247). Ruptures that problematize Welty’s photographic images were found in the punctum-like effects of unintended elements that puzzle the viewer, not unlike
the punctum effects in Rulfo’s image of the old Mexican woman. Welty’s shadow presence in a photograph leads to a comparison with an image of the same scene because of the many questions raised by its perplexing composition. The framing of her image of three boys at a state fair and the angle from which she took this picture underscores the status of the photograph as a cut-out from the real. Seeing the boys look out of the frame poses and problematizes imagining what the photograph’s larger context might be. And, since it is a photograph, the question cannot be overlooked. Having no clues to figure out what it is they are looking at, the viewer’s gaze is interrupted in an unexpected way that requires a personal engagement with the image, a confrontation with its illusive transparency and its open-endedness. This third phase of Cortázar’s description of the qualities of exceptional short stories, their explosive effects, involves thinking about the reader’s creative participation more extensively and explicitly. The juxtaposition of Rulfo’s and Welty’s photographs and short stories in this chapter has expanded Cortázar’s challenge to the reader to include the critical involvement of a viewer of photographs that exhibit qualities similar to those of short stories. The idea of a participatory reader is not only a feature that pertains to the short story’s explosive effects but it exists already and imaginatively in the writer’s selection of subject matter and the formal construction of great short stories.

CONCLUSION

The phases of construction of the short story in Cortázar’s theory involve the assumption that the reader is not a passive entity but is, in his terms, an accomplice (“lector complice”), or an engaged reader. The reader is present in the selection of haunting subject matter: the way the writer reacts to subject matter reflects how the reader is made to react to the story. Sphericity signals the story’s public appearance as an independent entity with the undetected presence of its
writer: in this phase, the short story is thought of as a bridge between the writer and the reader. The effects of the story are realized by readers in the process of reading and are given shape in its aftereffects: here, the compact tale is said to have an impact by its reverberations onto a much larger reality, reverberations that seek to transform the reader’s perceptions and, in Cortázar’s stories in particular, to experience the fantastic dimensions of the real and to envision reality with an openness to the possible. He proposes that short stories should be written for an engaged reader and, if—as is often suggested—Morelli is his mouthpiece, this proposed ideal reader (“lector cómplice”) more extensively developed in his novel *Hopscotch* might also figure as the desired reader of exceptional short stories. It is therefore suggested here that this non-traditional concept of the reader is inherent in his conceptualization of the short story. In reading Morelli’s notes in *Hopscotch,* it is learned that the reader will “… become a co-participant and co-sufferer of the experience through which the novelist is passing, at the same moment and in the same form” (397).

The literary text that engenders such a reader and binds him or her to the writer should be, for Cortázar, “… something like a façade, which the reader-accomplice will have to look for (therefore the complicity) and perhaps will not find (therefore the co-suffering)” (*Hopscotch* 398). The short story reader’s productive estrangement comes from how the experience of reading affects and transforms his or her life experience by confronting enigmas in the story that cannot be solved; the novel’s reader is asked not to read the novel as a succession of chapters but instead to read the chapters in a new and personally invented order, as if writing his or her own text. For Rulfo and Welty, openings created by the stories’ twists, turns, and frustrated

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75 Morelli is a philosopher, a central character in Cortázar’s novel *Hopscotch* who is thought by some to embody the writer’s ideas. He articulates his views in pieces called Morellianas, he is frequently cited, and his works are discussed by other characters in the novel. One of his concepts is the “lector cómplice” (reader accomplice).
expectations imply, as in Cortázar’s theory, that each reading is a new writing. Although Cortázar compares the short story to the photograph, he does not expound on what is expected of the viewer of photographs that contain the exceptional characteristics of a short story. Rulfo and Welty’s short stories, discussed in juxtaposition to photographs selected from among their published images, has shown how their stories are constructed with the idea of the reader as co-creator in mind and how their photographs have demonstrated the capacity to engender active viewing.

Reading the photographs and looking at the short stories through a camera lens guided by Cortázar’s acute descriptions of how to write a compelling story brings to light qualities that promote the active viewing of the photographs selected for this chapter, qualities that are likely to be found in photographs that have the capacity to engage viewers. Hence, the reader as accomplice is also a viewer become accomplice, in Cortázar’s terms. The capture and manipulation of light, darkness, and shadow as well as the inclusion, deliberate or unintentional, of incongruous detail among the elements that are found in the photographic frame are seen to prick and prod the viewer toward imagining new configurations out of what is seen in the frame, finding the spaces on the surface of the image that can give it depth with words. Or, finding in temporal dislocation—the past of the photograph and the present of its viewing—both a deeper probing into the image itself and to one’s viewing experience. As critic Liliane Louvel says in an article on intermedial criticism involving photography and literature, “Photography is fiction-inventive due to its capacity to generate stories. In its disconnection from the real, it offers to the gaze a concentration of experience asking to be verbalized and fictionalized” (45). The photograph’s ability to suggest motion in its stillness emerges from tensions among its depicted elements. Motion is suggested by arrested gestures seeking completion in the viewer’s mind, by
gestural dynamics among people and things within the frame, and by the very photograph itself, as a cutout of the continuous real.

The paradox of representing motion through stillness recalls another paradox embodied in the short story and the photograph: that the fragment, compact form, or slice of life must have the power to conjure for the reader and viewer a much larger reality, experienced as both a result of reading and viewing and as an aftereffect. Hidden objects, incomplete views, scenes missing explanatory details, etc., create intensity and negate viewers’ search for meaning within the frame of the photograph. Connections of the image to what might be outside of its frame and to the viewer’s present context have to be imagined along with a return to the image for a reading based on what seems to be amiss. Finally, a photograph is a paradoxical combination of the documentary and the fictional. Although the fictional construction of a photograph is foregrounded, its indexical nature cannot be overlooked. When the photographic image is successful in attracting and engaging a viewer, it shows an intricate intertwining of these two features, much like Cortázar’s interweaving of the fantastic and the real: when he says that the power of the fantastic arises from its grounding in the credible and verifiable, the same can be said of the fictional presentation of the real that is a photograph with the force to awaken its viewer. This juxtaposition of photographs and stories has, on the one hand, pointed to instances where readers and viewers become co-producers of textual and photographic meanings. On the other hand, this juxtaposition is also seen to favor a reconsideration of the short stories and an extension of Julio Cortázar’s theory from a photographic point of view.
EPILOGUE

If the evocative power of the short story lies in its visuality, the presence of visual images in short stories might be seen to diminish that power by being either a redundant accompaniment or an unfortunate distraction. My analysis of short story imagetexts demonstrates instead that the story’s visual features are enhanced when accompanied by visual images. More specifically, the properties brought to the imagetext by the photographic, qualities that appear as a result of the intermedial analysis demanded by such works, suggest that renewed attention to and heightened appreciation of the short story’s hybrid features is necessary. Whether constructed with or accompanied by photographic images, the dialogue between the images and texts of the stories discussed in this exploration draws from certain qualities endemic to the photographic: its multifaceted ambiguity, its expansive power and its interruptive potential. The photograph’s muteness and independence give it the capacity to resist being reduced to its adjacent verbal texts although, conversely, its ambiguous nature also makes it available for the manufacture of indeterminate meanings.

When juxtaposed to fictional texts such as the analyzed imagetext stories of this dissertation, the photographic provokes, for its reader/viewer, a radical engagement with the tension between fiction and reality or, in other terms, between the artistic and the documentary. By seemingly grounding the literary text in the real, the presence of the photographic is paradoxically seen to accentuate the fictionality of the text. In turn, the photograph finds its verisimilar qualities complicated and creatively compromised by its very placement within a fictional text. Some of these twentieth century short stories were composed by an intertwining of
the factual and the fictional, using the photographic in ways that play with commonsense notions of depth, surface and scale with the intent to confound perceptual reading and viewing habits in order to experiment with new aesthetic configurations and to simultaneously prompt critical reflection. The poetic effects of such interweaving appear, for example, in the contrast between the imagetext short story and journalistic photo-essays of this same era as well as in stories constructed with visual and verbal collages that quote the ‘real’ and mirror each other’s factual and fictional entanglements. In sum, when a photograph is relocated in the context of a short story, its construction and fictionality are stressed, making its reading oscillate between its referential and artistic status. Photographs in short stories also appear as imaginative emulations of the compact and expansive nature of the short story in which they feature or with which they are paired.

It would seem at first glance that the expansive power of a photographic image located within or adjacent to a short story would hijack and dissolve the latter’s ability to speak beyond its compact frame. The opposite is true: when photograph and short story are read transversally their condensation effects are significantly enhanced and the expansive power of each made more manifest. Furthermore, an intermedial reading of such stories more forcefully engenders opportunities for the reader/viewer to make associations between the imagetext and other works of literature or the visual arts, thus expanding the critical range of a simultaneous reading and viewing or a reading that is also a seeing.

The presence of the photographic in a short story signals its potential to halt the story’s narrative flow, even for non-linear imagetext stories where the verbal text is constructed like a collage in order to intercept the expected flow and then defy the comfort of chronology. The spatial layout of image and text on a page calls attention to the blank spaces between them in a
manner that both slows down reading and viewing and changes the directionality of how the page is read. The most dramatic interruptive use of the photographic is found in the analyses of film adaptations of short stories, especially when film’s static photographic basis is revealed by these same interruptions. Hence, the appearance of the photographic in film echoes the interruptive force of the photograph in the imagetext short story. It also prompts the formulation of the concept of the pensive spectatorship of film.

The idea of pensive viewing originates in Roland Barthes’s distinction between film and photography developed in *Camera Lucida* and adopted by film critics who use it to define the moment and place for a critical viewing and reading of film. The stillness of a photograph or a photogram allows “pensiveness” which is characterized by the ability to linger on the image, a lingering that ultimately triggers seeing beyond the frame of the image (*Camera Lucida* 55). In this study, the concept of the pensive viewer was brought together with Julio Cortázar’s idea of the reader as accomplice (“lector cómplice”) to define the creative and critical reader/viewer seen to emerge from the intermedial analysis of short story imagetexts. Cortázar’s actively engaged reader of the short story is also an estranged reader. Narrators and characters in his stories are asked—as are readers—to step into the openings created whereby one is suddenly faced with and forced to acknowledge the unconscious forces that shape everyday life. On the uneasy threshold of the fantastic and the everyday, readers—like narrators and characters—must search for the elusive meanings and outcomes due to the fragility of their liminal positionings. If, in order to define the way to capture and captivate the reader, Cortázar employs somewhat violent metaphors such as the “knock-out” or the explosive powers of the short story, the response he demands of the readers of his work requires, above all, “pensiveness.” In order to step away from the story and to allow its effects to impact and mobilize the reader’s subjective
experience, it is necessary to engage in pensive appreciation, a stance which engenders new meanings. Similarly, the pensive viewing of a photograph generates an awareness of things external to it, giving to the image the expansive powers Roland Barthes finds in the subjective discovery of details that pierce the photographic image (punctum) and extend its meanings. Although many critics have associated the modernist shock effects of the photograph with Cortázar’s definition of the short story, envisioning the short story’s relationship to the photograph through a focus on how pensive reading and viewing enable the actualization of the effects of both media—whether separate or conjoined—is arguably more productive. The compact structure of the short story and the fragmenting frame of the photograph expand only as a result of being read or seen by both a pensive and actively creative reader/viewer.

In an era in which most if not all readers are photographers and in which imagetexts are ubiquitous, the pedagogical concern about how to develop critical and creative viewing and reading seems particularly significant. The fact that readers have become viewers and regular producers of imagetexts raises the following question: do the technological changes in photography—namely the shift from analog to digital—radically modify the questions posed, issues raised, and relationships discovered in this dissertation’s examination of the impact of the photographic on the short story? On the one hand, the properties of the photographic such as framing, likeness, reproducibility, fragmentation, scalar variation, as well as the much discussed paradoxes of photography—presence/absence, life/death, stillness/motion, past/present, truth/fiction, and compactness/expansion—continue to inform our viewing of digital photographic images in part because we bring to these new images our beliefs about the truth value of the photograph. On the other hand, however, photography is characterized by its slippery nature because of its endless technological mutations and usages, these changes—such
as the shift in the support of the image from paper to screen which is also applicable to literature-
- will inevitably modify the approaches taken to analyze contemporary photographic imagetexts.
Consequently, the questions raised here by analyzing the co-presence of the photographic in
twentieth century short story imagetexts remain relevant for works of short fiction and
photography in the twenty-first century providing, however, that these questions are rethought
and informed by new technological developments in photography and by the continued and
exploratory use of the photographic in the social realm and in works of visual art, both of which
will greatly impact current and future short stories whether written with photographs or not.
ILLUSTRATIONS
Fig. 2.1

Two image-texts, women and subway platforms. Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes. *The Sweat*.

Two imagemets: Harlem elders and Melinda with child. Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes. 
THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

...from somewhere. It is Verdi's great work. The students wandered among the exhibits. The Fisher King was present among the industrial achievements. A good-looking woman, behind a velvet rope. The manufacturer described them as "perfect and objectionable." The included, and grouped. Hosting them with boxes is no longer

...and having them do no longer permitted, speaking is permitted but only under extraordinary circumstances. The Fisher King was there. In Comme la Cigale by Spinoza and

...called "a useless clinical entity." But Spinoza himself has never caught up, so far as is known. Transfer...

...from the world to the eye is permitted if you have only the...loyalty to the world, to the eye, in Comme la Cigale, to move on. The two major theories of origins, evolution and

...up to the necks of the bronze heads of the True Gods. On the walls, portraits of people...The visible universe was truly very unsettled, a great deal of movement, fast—unpredictable with...

...the modern and old figures, things like assisted...I.

I was reading a story of Bishop's at the Tobago Museum. It
was that story a bishop is on a ship. One of the bishop's
passengers tells the bishop about an island on which there
were ten. The tenors are to be extremely devout. The
Tobago is sailed with a cleric to see and stiff with the ten-
ors. He preaches the meaning of the ship on the island
he goes out to, and all know. The captain of the
bishops is the bishop, now and now, and now, how, the
Tobago. They have a prayer that says: "There are ten, they are
ten, and we are ten." The bishops come to this in a
way, but they never lived in the way. He, like his men,
the tenors, will pray. The bishops hear the Lord's Prayer
but with the greatest difficulty. Night has fallen, the idea
they have of it corrected.

The bishop returns to his ship, happy that he has been
in the island, in their worship. The ship sails on.
The bishop's time is spent, mediating about the expen-
sures of the day. He goes to the ship's builder, the ship.
The night is dark, by the three windows, looking over the water,
head of land, leaving moving dark feet. They sail to the
ship, saying: "We have forgotten, servants of God,
in your ship on sea, you are now, you are now, you are now.
You are our cloister!" The bishops leave to the
deck. The premises by boat over the sea, hand to hand, in
the midst.

The story is written in a very simple style. It is said to
originate in a first place. There is a version of it by St. Augus-
tine, that it was incredible, disproved by reading this story, by
Dwight Howells.
The Photographs

The attached photograph, of the human and ring (Fig. 2) taken by Heineman, M. D., in spacecraft, to investigate the solar cosmic system, were made on December 24, 1979, as the spacecraft was leaving the magnetic field of Jupiter. The photographs (taken with cooled solar spectrophotometers tuned to each of the photosensitive detectors' bands but not to the wavelengths of Jupiter's auroras) were submitted to the photographic lab. In one of the mission's chief sites, they were created by Dr. Reginald Heaton, J.R.A., of the European Space Research Organization, using Heaton's spectrophotometric plate type (Hi) based on the exposure at 600°C, under dry 90% before exposure. Dr. Heaton, very shortly afterward, brought the resulting images to his friend and colleague Dr. William Whittaker-Moore, F.R.S.

With the invention of vulcanization by Goodyear in 1839, it became possible to obtain a rubber that retained a high degree of resilience over a wide range of temperatures. This development had its most important applications in the rubber automobile tire. America quickly became a nation of wheels.

Originally linked to the internal-combustion engine to provide cheap individual transportation, the wheel assumed new attributes in the 1890s with the arrival of (1) self-powering devices and (2) the so-called “elastic transportation.”

The interface of man and machine had long before produced a sense of shared mental activity. The human factor had been, however, dominant. Men had been “driving the horses,” but now a product of technology had developed “a mind of its own.” Human factors stood, this disquieting, in the extreme.

It rapidly became clear that a technological revolution of an order of magnitude beyond anything previously imaginable had taken place. Moreover, behavior of the new apparatus tended to be obtrusively valuable: A number of “incidents” were recorded.

I worked for newspapers. I worked for newspapers at a time when I was not competent to do so. I reported inaccurately. I failed to get all the facts. I misinterpreted events. I published figures. I wanted copy paper. I pronounced I knew things I did not know. I proceeded to understand things beyond my understanding. I misunderstood. I misinterpreted. I was superior to things I was inferior to. I misinterpreted things that took place before me. I saw and understood what took place before me. I exaggerated what the management seemed to expect. I exaggerated what the management seemed to expect. I received news the management wanted to see. I falsified stories. I falsified to discover the truth. I revised the truth with facts. I had no interest in the truth. I placed to hide the truth, you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free. I put lies in the paper, I put false facts in the paper. I wrote headlines containing double entendres, I wrote stories while drunk, I cleared copy boys. I carried paper with anything. I accepted gifts from miscellaneous persons. I was amiable with superiors. I was bashful with people who called on the telephone seeking information. I quoted over false photographs of sex crimes. I accepted type when the makeup wasn't looking. I took copy people home. I wanted all management in civil positions.

**RHYTHMIC HANDCLAPPING**

**SLEEPING**

**WHAT RECOUSE?**

Five Untitled Photographs by Julio Cortez: "Del
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(Mexico D.F., 1930-37-31).
"Vecindades de la colonia Guadalupe." Photograph by Juan Rufino, *Información y México de Acrón Rufino.*

(Huacover M.H.: Ediciones del Norte, 1983, unpag.)
"Casa en llamas." Photograph by Juan Ruffo. *Inframundo, de Arán Ruffo.*

(Hanover, N.H.: Ediciones del Norte, 1983: unpagd.)
"Ruins of Fort Windsor/Port Gibson/1862" Photograph by Endora Waltz. In Photographic (Jackson: U. of Mississippi Press, 2001, Plate 119)
"House after high water/Rudney. " Photograph by Eudora Welty. *One Time One Place.* (FY: Random House, 1971, 47)


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Turner/Criterion, 2004. Film.


Wells, H. G. *The Door in the Wall and Other Stories.* NY: Mitchell Kennerley, 1911.


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