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ABSTRACT

The spread of mobile technologies and social media have contributed to making snapshot photography an ordinary part of everyday life. As snapshots become more omnipresent, asking why we take so many photos becomes less exigent than asking what might stop us from doing so. Drawing on insights from affect theory, new materialism, and studies of visual rhetoric, this article argues that deterrents to snapping pictures arise not only from the range of human rhetorics or “laws” that influence our actions or inactions, but also from a dynamic tangle of extrahuman factors, ineffable though this influence may be. Speculating about the implications of these extrahuman deterrents for how we understand rhetoric, I suggest that the ineffable enchantment of certain encounters exhibits a worldly rhetoricity in itself, one that conditions the possibility of—and sometimes prevents—the anthropogenic symbolic actions we are more accustomed to recognizing as rhetorical.

KEYWORDS: visual rhetoric, presence, affect, new materialism, the ineffable

A SYMPHONY, THE MILKY WAY

Before photography went digital and camera phones accompanied people most everywhere, Pierre Bourdieu observed in 1965 that photography had become a “middle-brow art” (1998). “How and why,” he asked, “is the practice of photography predisposed to a diffusion so wide that there are few households, at least in towns, which do not possess a camera?” (13). Novel at the time, the question has been superseded today. Estimates indicate that 1.27 *trillion* new photographs will be taken in 2017 (Infotrends, 2014).

That amounts to an ambient symphony of over forty thousand clicking shutters per second. That means the human population will take three times more photographs in one year than there are stars in the Milky Way. But however we vivify the numbers, the evidence is plain to anyone paying attention: more people are snapping more photographs than ever before. Although, like Bourdieu, we might ask *why*, if we concede how omnipresent snapshot photography has become, then the reasons we take so many photos may be moot. More exigent today is the matter of what might possibly compel us to put our cameras down.

This article explores the problem of deterrents against photography in an age when such deterrents seem largely to have disappeared. Of course, despite the normalcy of unpoCKETING a phone and snapping a pic, taking photos is still discouraged in some places and situations. At museums, perhaps, or in theaters, in politically sensitive areas, at intimate social functions—for various reasons explicit or tacit we are sometimes given to refrain from taking snapshots. Though these reasons are manifold, they can generally be understood as deriving from human “laws” (cultural, social, religious, juridical, etc.), invented and promulgated through rhetorics devised by people in their ongoing yet situational attempts to make themselves accountable to one another.

I’m going to argue, though, that alongside the human laws and rhetorics that influence our actions or inactions, we also sometimes encounter things so enchanting that our mere entanglement among them seems to issue its own kind of dissuasion. In other words, I propose, deterrents against photography do not arise only from such human influences as our laws, norms, persuasive language, technologies, and so forth. A dynamic tangle of extrahuman factors also exerts a powerful influence on us, ineffable though this influence may be. From this supposition a question follows. As Nathan Stormer has asked, “Where do the capacities needed to act rhetorically come from if we presume that they are *not only* human attributes, but are afforded by the material ecology in which the action occurs?” (2015, 319). Answers are elusive in part because if extrahuman forms of persuasion do exist, they must by nature be inexpressible in human terms. Merely to identify them would at once “translate” them into a legible rhetoric and thereby attenuate the inherent power of their presence.

The task ahead, then, is speculative: to explore what follows from supposing that there are occasions in everyday experience when dissuasion from taking pictures seems to come from our entanglement in the world itself rather than from human laws.¹ The stakes are high. If prohibition is

not just a product of human design but ecologically and materially systemic to a dynamic world, then the “negative” is intrinsic to matter itself. Taking seriously this possibility requires revising Kenneth Burke’s definition of humans as *Homo symbolicus*—if not his treatment of humans as the “symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal,” then at least his claim that humankind is the “inventor of the negative” (1966, 16). That will require a major rethinking of rhetoric and its relationship to everyday life (how perfectly rotten). The rhetorical tradition may be a well-proven resource for understanding how the symbolic influences around us can motivate human action in our inescapably human contexts. But the rhetorical tradition has struggled until only very recently even to acknowledge the ecological, affective, and ambient powers of the material world, a world equally as inescapable, though its various configurations seem to lack the same agency or expressibility that we quickly attribute to people. In short, if the prevalence of snapshot photography gives us reason to believe that images have an intrinsic liveliness, we must also acknowledge the vitality that precedes and eludes their emergence as pictures—a vitality that unconceals the rhetorical qualities of the ineffable.

A RIVER, A STORM

Before we were married, my wife and I spent a summer in India. Our first morning in the city of Varanasi, an ominous storm was gathering over the Ganges. We’d been walking maybe thirty minutes, taking in the vibrant riverfront life of this city, thought to be the oldest continually inhabited place on the planet, when a raindrop broke from the sky and splattered on the steps before us. Then another. And all at once a deluge. Cradling our cameras, we rushed for the nearest shelter we could find, settling beneath a concrete structure on legs that had been erected over the deep stairs leading from the shore to the old city above. Here we joined a gathering of human and animal life alike: sun-chapped boatmen; cows that were all shoulder blades and snout; three generations of women in saris; men in rags and dreadlocks and long white beards; a disoriented hen, matted with rain. All of us huddled together. No one spoke. We watched the storm assemble over the river, too curtained nearly to see. In only minutes, impossible water cascaded down the stairs, covering our feet, our ankles, our calves. Lumps of shit, animal or human, floated over our toes. The cow sneezed. A man as ageless as a tree smiled at us with missing teeth. Never had I felt more *inside* the world around me. And then it was over. The rain moved backward.

The clouds, the river, they took the water elsewhere. People dispersed. The animals sauntered on. As if nothing had happened, we turned around and up the remaining stairs, and there we saw it, flat on the steps: a dead human body that had been there all along.

The literary arts have a rich history of trying, as I just have, to represent human encounters with the extraordinary. Often, such encounters reveal that the extraordinary is rather *intraordinary* instead, that there's a vital materiality we have lived amid all along, though it seldom goes perceived. In Nabokov's short story, "Terror," for instance, the narrator describes seeing "the actual essence of all things," houses and trees and human faces stripped of all ascribed meaning and seen instead for themselves, an encounter so terrifying it snaps the narrator's "line of communication with the world" (2002, 177). Celebrating such moments as almost magical, Karl Ove Knausgaard describes them as instances when "you catch sight of another world from the one you were in only a moment earlier, where the world seems to step forward and show itself for a brief glimpse before reverting and leaving everything as before" (2013, 222). And for the poet Louis MacNeice, it's the falling snow glimpsed outside a great bay window that brings a striking realization: "World is suddener than we fancy it. / World is crazier and more of it than we think, / Incorrigibly plural" (1980, 116).

This "suddener" world is just what we encountered during the storm in Varanasi. Any traveler who experienced something similar might feel compelled to tell his or her story too. (My story will serve as a recurrent touchstone here.) Encounters with the extraordinary have a way of drawing us into representation. On one hand, their astonishing frisson invites an all-too-human impulse to document the there there. On the other hand, the unique power of such enchantment renders any effort to represent it futile. And yet, though I have told this story countless times to friends and now reproduced it here, I did not take a picture. How is it that a story is an acceptable mode of capture, but a picture was not? How can someone feel a picture's potential, be perfectly free of human constraints to take it, and yet be compelled *not* to snap it all the same?

As a Western tourist, camera at hand, I had certainly wanted to document our vibrant moment of encounter. But at precisely the time I felt most vitalized, most attuned to my relational connection amid human and nonhuman things, we encountered the ultimate lack of vitality in death itself. We literally had to step across the corpse. The situation forbade being fixed in a photograph, in part because of some perceived propriety, yes, but in part for a different reason. *The event defied representation.* A photo would

merely lock it into an ordered world, frame its parameters, and in doing so cut off the bristling tendrils of relationality that identified me with the storm carrying on downriver, the hen bobble-heading its indirection, all the people going about their daily offices again. In this sense, the usual rhetorics of decorum and human persuasion cannot account without remainder for what stops us from photographing certain encounters. As powerful as photographs can be, sometimes sustaining their very *absence* is what calls us more tenderly to the world around us.

MICROWAVE DINNERS, NORTHERN LIGHTS

For over twenty years, the pictorial turn across disciplines has attempted to account for the astonishing power and prevalence of images, both as material pictures and as potentiality, to explain their capacity for imag(in)ing our reality (Mitchell 1994, 11–34). It is worth noting that this scholarship tends to differentiate between *images* and *pictures*. As W. J. T. Mitchell quotably aphorizes, “You can hang a picture, but you can’t hang an image” (2009, 16). Images are immaterial, he says, “a ghostly, fantasmatic appearance that comes to light or comes to life (which may be the same thing) in a material support” (16). Pictures, by contrast, are the materialization of images: paintings, posters, murals, screenshots, photographs.²

One commonplace of scholarship in visual culture is the recognition that images have a vitality that exceeds the human tendency to accord it to them. Whether refuting the supposition that treating images and objects with animistic, magical powers is only a tendency of “primitive” or non-Western societies (Freedberg 1989), recognizing that art objects take-on “lives” of their own by substituting for human agents (Gell 1998), or taking seriously the belief that “pictures are something like life-forms, driven by desire and appetites” (Mitchell 2005, 6), scholars of the visual often treat images as intrinsically powerful things. This “new kind of animism” (Wolff 2012, 5) indicates that the omnipresence of photography today might be understood as an innate human response to the intrinsic draw of images. Possessed of the means to produce and share so many photos, then, it’s only natural we’d want to do so.

A strange contradiction, however, characterizes our photo-inclined moment: never have snapshots had such force in our social lives, yet never have they been so unremarkable. What’s more, all subjects and contexts—from microwave dinners to northern lights—have attained a kind of equivalency through the camera’s lens. In turn, it is as hard to tell if photographic

representation is special or utterly quotidian as it is to determine whether all or none of our material encounters are powerful.³ It has become difficult, that is, to disentangle those rhetorics that create the situational conditions for a photograph from those rhetorical qualities that a photograph exhibits once it's come into being—even as the abundance of snapshots today makes this distinction more exigent than ever.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, studies of visual rhetoric have been far better at revealing the rhetorical characteristics of images once they've materialized as pictures than they have at revealing the rhetoricity of images as non-representational apparitions within the material ecologies in which they're encountered. As Bradford Vivian notes, most scholars of visual rhetoric operate “according to representational thought and language, positing that images represent (in visual form) decipherable arguments, experiences or ideas” (2007, 472). Without doubt, this tendency has led to valuable work that underscores the rhetorical qualities of photographs in particular, from their enthymematic nature (Finnegan 2001), to their capacity to perform civic identity (Hariman and Lucaites 2007), to their propensity to constitute publics nondiscursively (Finnegan and Kang 2004), to the numerous illustrations that photographs make arguments. Vivian's concern, though, which I share, is not that such “representational” thinking isn't valuable but that it obscures the ways the nonrepresentational aspects of images—our borderless encounters in the throes of a dynamic world—create *conditions of possibility* for picturing that have a rhetorical quality themselves.

It turns out that the conditions of possibility for symbolic action have been of special interest to rhetorical scholarship that draws on affect theory and new materialist thought to develop more ecological understandings of rhetoricity. Diane Davis and Thomas Rickert have framed the larger conversation with particular alacrity. Both equate affect and persuadability. In *Inessential Solidarity*, Davis aims “to expose an originary (or preoriginary) rhetoricity—an affectability or persuadability—that is the condition for symbolic action” (2010, 2). For Davis, who thinks with Levinas, an encounter with the Other carries with it an obligation to respond. That obligation precedes the symbolic yet creates the very condition of its possibility. Insofar as we are always entangled with the foreign, enmeshed and enfleshed in affective relations with other bodies and things, rhetoricity is a condition of our very entanglement.

Rickert writes similarly, in *Ambient Rhetoric*, that “affect, or persuadability, already inheres, both materially and meaningfully, and is therefore prior to rhetoric. It is the condition of possibility for rhetoric's emergence”

(2013, 159). For Rickert, who thinks with Heidegger, being-in-the-world involves being attuned to the ambience of a dynamic world in a particular way. Attunement is a disposition to how one finds oneself emplaced; it always already unfolds within “an originary, worldly rhetoricity, an affectability inherent in how the world comes to be” (8–9). Both Davis and Rickert lead us to imagine that, when it comes to photographs, the symbolic actions of their materialization are not the only source of their rhetoricity. A worldly rhetoricity precedes and capacitates them as well. The problem I have been thinking through has concerned how this immanent persuadability might also entail a certain dissuadability. If worldly rhetoricity precedes symbolic rhetoricity, can it also prevent it?

A PIPE, A BENCH

A few years ago I saw a René Magritte exhibit at the Art Institute of Chicago. The show included his famous painting *The Treachery of Images*, which depicts a pipe above the caption “Ceci n’est une pipe” (“This is not a pipe”). Foucault devotes an entire monograph to the painting, and it had always seemed to me that Magritte demonstrates in a surprisingly simple manner what scholars of visual culture have needed hundreds of pages to describe: namely, that the visual and linguistic operate in different ways. The painting *requires* the caption, that is, language, to negate what it visually represents, because the visual alone cannot negate itself. As Sol Worth puts it, “Pictures can’t say ain’t” (1981). Or, in Foucault’s succinct variation, “To paint is not to affirm” (1983, 53). The resemblance of an image to something, attained through its representation, does not assure its affirmation, which is attained beyond representation. Because Magritte’s painting is such a conceptual work, I had not imagined seeing it in person would be revelatory; however, seeing the painting in person turned out to make this point clearer, but not for the reasons you’d expect.

One does not see paintings in art exhibits as if in a vacuum. One encounters them in space, in various shades of light, among people, quiet or not, with the attendant guards and puckered benches and cordoned-off barriers. Exhibits are designed in a manner that attunes those there to be affected by the artworks in particular ways. This is their ambient rhetoricity, the means of their persuadability. What struck me at the Magritte exhibit was that so many people interacted with the space, with the paintings, through the screen of their phones, often taking photos of the paintings before (in some cases even without) pausing to experience them directly. It’s not that this

was startling, that some people now go through galleries taking pictures of paintings rather than being immediately present to them, but it did underscore part of what Magritte is up to in *The Treachery of Images*. Visual representation is alluring because it seems to affirm that which it merely resembles. The painting seems to affirm the pipe, its caption exposes that it can't, and the photos people take try to document each, as if the painting's affirmation and negation alike can be captured in a photograph—that is, as if the dynamic image they encounter by the puckered bench and amid other visitors is altogether reducible to the framed canvas on the wall.

But it isn't. Paradoxically, pictures consist both in what you see and what you don't. Pictures depict what is *not* there. The material presence of the representation is inseparable from the material absence of what is represented. Maurice Blanchot has described this phenomenon as the "presence-absence" of a picture (2003, 14), which is similar to the corollary notion that a picture is seductive because "it continues to affirm things in their disappearance" (1989, 254). By snapping a photo in the exhibit, people not only end up with a picture of the Magritte painting that affirms *its* having been there; they also end up with a picture after they leave the museum that affirms *their* having being there. "Every photograph," Roland Barthes writes, "is a certificate of presence" (1981, 87). Photographs are especially adept at certifying presence because they offer what Barthes elsewhere calls an "analogical plenitude"—a denotative, representational abundance that defies linguistic description (1977, 18). If photos also insist that there is a deficit, it is because they try to capture an irreducible singularity: an unrepeatable moment in time and place, which, by virtue of being unrepeatable, is as much an evocation of absence as of the presence that it represents.

Jens Kjeldsen has recently drawn on a similar observation to suggest that studies of visual communication fall broadly into two camps, phenomenological and semiotic. In the phenomenological view, pictures are events—"a sort of mediated *evidentia*"—and in the semiotic, they operate as "a codified *language* system" (2015, 202). Kjeldsen, however, refuses the choice, arguing that photography's power comes from its capacity to "work as both event and language system." Its ability to serve as an event allows us to see "how analogical plenitude creates presence, realism, and immediacy," while its ability to serve as a language system helps us see "how pictures can work as a culturally coded language" (202). Alluding to Clifford Geertz's famous formulation, Kjeldsen describes this dual character of photography as its facility with "thick representation." Photography's affordance of thick representation enables it to be far more efficient than language at

conveying the innumerable microdetails of whatever scene it depicts. Thick representation does not just confer photographs with more veridicality, as if photographs were akin to verbal lines of reasoning. By placing a pictured subject before a viewer, photographs also provide a “vivid presence” that approaches the nonrepresentational insofar as encounters with it situate the viewer in an engrossing relationship of immediacy with the image they are seeing.

The rhetorical tradition tends to think of this relationship of immediacy—this *presence*—as a technique of argumentation that achieves specific effects. In an influential passage from their *New Rhetoric*, Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca describe “presence” as a way of filling “the whole field of consciousness” so to prevent an audience from thinking about what is not being said or claimed (1969, 118). Presence, in this sense, is an extreme close-up: a nose-to-nose encounter that, by occupying all the senses, forces everything else out of mind. But the unstated assumption is that a human agent forwards presence as an invented symbolic action useful for the influence it might have on those perceiving it. Such presence, then, is less about being present to any vital im-mediacy than about diverting attention *away* from what is absent. Though photographs may well have the presence to accomplish this diversion, to understand the conditions of possibility that give rise to photography we also need an ecological understanding of presence as something that both capacitates and exceeds human inventional arts.

If snapping photos of paintings at the Magritte exhibit was typical practice (photography was not officially prohibited), that isn’t especially surprising. The space was a veritable altar to representational arts. Within such a space—an exhibit, of course, designed and curated by human invention—the vitality of pictures is so rhetorically foregrounded that “taking” photographs from it makes a certain sense. Could we say that those who *didn’t* take pictures, like myself, were compelled not to do so by some worldly rhetoricity within the exhibit that somehow discouraged photographic representation? *Maybe*. But who knows? This is the speculative quandary we find ourselves in: that to imagine that worldly rhetoricity has a dissuasive quality, to imagine that the negative is inscribed in existence, we would need to suppose in the case of photography that before we click the shutter, something about the ambient and always unfolding world’s presence compels us to absorb its immediacy rather than to expunge it through its representation. One problem is how we could possibly know whether this is the case. Another is that this would involve a decidedly different kind of

rhetorical presence than the one Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca envision. To begin with, it would neither originate in an autonomous actor directed toward a specifiable audience, nor would it ever relent: the world around us *always* has presence, whether we're attuned to it or not. The question is how, if not from human rhetorics directing our attention, we become attuned to the presence around us in a way that arrests the impulse to re-present it in a photograph. It is a question, that is, of enchantment.

A DEAD RAT, A PLASTIC CAP

In one of Jane Bennett's efforts to theorize an ecology of matter, she struggles to express the reverberations of a particularly poignant encounter—in her case, with a pile of trash (2004, 349–51). Against expectation, the quotidian world confronted her in its vital immediacy. It was one of those “occasions in ordinary life when the us and the it slips into each other” (349), and we learn to articulate a “sympathetic link” between the human and nonhuman by attending to the vitality and interconnectedness of things all around us—a naïve moment, she explains, when “thing-power comes to presence” (366). For Bennett, this happened when she encountered the strange confluence of a dead rat, a wooden stick, and a plastic cap. In this assemblage, she realized that “humans are never *outside* of a set of relations with other modes” (353). In short, the ordinary emerged as extra-ordinary, just as it had for me during the storm in Varanasi.

What if the absence of, and hence the desire for the legibility of the extra-ordinary were the condition that made possible an image's materialization as an expression of that very desire? Do we take pictures to transcend mundane everyday life? If that were the case, I would have taken a picture of my stunning Indian encounter and, accordingly, been rewarded with a document showcasing photography's capacities for thick representation. But to recognize the ordinariness of our human emplacement within the extraordinariness of the extrahuman is precisely to become entangled with the world in a way that, momentarily at least, deters any possibility of symbolic action because meaning suddenly (as it were) is as nothing next to presence. These are the times, as I experienced in Varanasi, when the world effervesces its extraordinariness through the eventful assemblage of human and nonhuman matter. The shit floating over our toes, the sneeze of the cow. While it was all impossibly ordinary, from within its ordinariness it became something more, something ordinarily absent. In this way, an absence may be the condition of a photo's potential emergence; it's just

that the *photo* will have become ordinary, making it undesirable, forbidden in the future anterior.

In her third book, *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (2001), Bennett begins to develop the theory of vital materialism for which she is widely known today. There she calls it “enchanted materialism,” the idea being that however *disenchanted* we may have become by religion, by the commoditization of culture, and by other false idols of modernity, we are nevertheless surrounded by enchanting things all the time. The trouble is they’re often inanimate material things whose wondrous energy we are not very good at noticing. But by learning to become more attuned to these enchanting encounters, she argues, we will come to recognize our emplacement within a wild and arresting world and, accordingly, become more motivated to follow the ethical codes that on their own cannot sustain the political and social generosity needed for our times.

It’s a lovely argument. Nevertheless, by suggesting that enchantment can inspire a political ethics and that the inanimate, material-affective things of the world are what so often enchant us, Bennett creates a burden of proof to demonstrate that inanimate things do in fact have such ethical energy. Her attempt to meet this burden resulted in her subsequent book, *Vibrant Matter* (2010). By all appearances, *Vibrant Matter* has become the touchstone for those who draw on Bennett’s insights to think about the political ramifications of imagining a world not centered on the human, a world in which inanimate things have an agential power of their own “to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” alongside those produced by the usual human or “cultural” actors (6). And deservedly so. It’s an elegant and economic book. But we miss the breadth of her argument if we unpair it from the ideas that made it necessary.

Enchantment, in other words, is essential to the ecological stakes of the vibrant materialism that Bennett endorses (see Khan, 2009, 96–103). It is also essential to the implications of her argument for rhetoric. Nathan Stormer has expressed these implications as an outright challenge to the ways we think about the rhetorical. “Theories of rhetoric,” Stormer observes, “ubiquitously presume that the force of a rhetorical agent or agency depends on more than its embodiment, that an intangible super-added element—reason, meaning, feeling, motive—works through the rhetorical body to spark metamorphosis in the respondent” (2015, 320). Against these presumptions, though, Stormer suggests, “Bennett challenges us to understand rhetoric as fully emergent, arising dynamically from the concatenation of all things” (320). If my speculative inquiry into extrahuman

deterrents against photography can help us to understand this challenge, that is not because the concatenation of all things has a rhetoricity that is easily legible. Moments of enchantment, however, uniquely disclose for us how our perpetual emplacement in a material ecology involves an immanent rhetorical force to which we are ordinarily unattuned.

Bennett understands enchantment “as a state of openness to the disturbing-captivating elements in everyday experience” (2001, 131). It is “a window onto the virtual within the actual” (131). Bracketing the ethical potential she ascribes to enchantment (because we need not accept her political project to recognize that vital materialism forces a redrawing of rhetoric’s limits), we might imagine my encounter with the storm in Varanasi, like her encounter with a pile of trash or Nabokov’s with the “actual essence of all things,” to exemplify enchantment’s power to arrest symbolic action in favor of presence. “To be enchanted,” Bennett explains, “is to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday” (2001, 4). It is therefore “to participate in a momentarily immobilizing encounter; it is to be transfixed, spellbound” (2001, 5). This transfixion—this “moment of pure presence” (Fisher, qtd. in Bennett, 2001, 5)—must take place for the world to arrest our action with its intrinsic dissuasion.

A CATHEDRAL, A DOORWAY

One way to think about those encounters capable of inducing enchantment is through the concept of the sublime. The word comes from the Latin “*sublimus*”: “*sub*” (up to) + “*limen*” (lintel, the top of a door), and hence it carries a sense of being raised aloft, on high, as when one sees the Alps or, on a more human scale, enters a cathedral and feels awestruck by its grandeur (see Shaw 2006, 1). But a different etymology could also suggest that the sublime is something more liminal: “*sub*” (under) + “*limen*” (threshold). To encounter the sublime, in this variation, would be to enter a threshold, a doorway in between one thing and another, and therefore to experience both as coextensive, if only momentarily. We may experience this version of the sublime in encounters with something extraordinary, but what we experience is just how intraordinary the extraordinary is. It may not, that is, be the recognition of our human smallness relative to nature or human aesthetic creation that makes the sublime so affecting but rather the recognition of a shared immanence among all things that decenters the human and orients us to what Bennett calls “the surprise of other selves and bodies” in a more open and generous way (2001, 131).⁴

Imagine a sudden, coordinated turn by a flock of birds, or the play of mottled light on a flowering tree. It is easy, through such examples, to see that the world offers images whose vitality sometimes issues calls so seemingly transcendent that the desire to photograph them is virtually compulsive. But confronting our immanence, the shared thing-power of everything living or not, can also yield the opposite impulse: to pause, to be present, to search for no meaning outside the encounter, and hence *not* to photograph it. If this enchantment is temporary, that is because we must go on living according to the laws of a world that does traffic in symbolic action, mediation, interpretation. Telling a story about the flock of birds necessarily happens after the birds have flown away; by then, we're no longer enchanted (which helps to explain why even though I didn't photograph my encounter in Varanasi, I've had no problem telling the story). Photographs can only be taken *during* encounters with what they seek to depict. Because they require, however briefly, a mediated disengagement from such encounters, they *can* be deterred when the ineffable power of an encounter arrests us within it.

Within the vocabulary of the rhetorical tradition, this may sound like a matter of enchantment leading one to miss the kairotic moment when snapping a photo would be most opportune. But to see it that way would be to miss what matters most. At issue in the extrahuman conditions of a photo's possibility is not some kairotic temporality vis-à-vis rhetorical invention. At issue is our human attunement to the ways certain encounters disclose our embeddedness within them so completely that we seem almost not to belong there. And in our "illicit" presence, which is actually brought on by a sudden, surprising sense of insideness—a sort of witness with the world we hadn't been attuned to just moments before—there is no longer quite anything being encountered. There is no photo there to take. Street photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson's most famous book, *The Decisive Moment* (1952), offers a telling illustration. The book did a fair deal to entrench the idea that photography is a kairotic art of capturing a fleeting moment in time when its subject's quintessence is best evinced. But the collection's original French title, *Images à la Saurvette* ("images taken on the sly"), conveys a notion far closer to the one I'm proposing. A feeling for the decisive moment of a subject's essential concrescence with its dynamic environment may well be important, formally speaking, but to capture this moment is always to do so furtively, *on the sly*, because in order to take any photograph the photographer must be willing to betray the encountered event by taking herself out of it.

It is not, then, that there are no opportune moments to take a photograph that manifests expressive intensity but rather that sometimes we have embedded encounters that *produce presence* of intensity, opening us to the Other, even the nonhuman Other, in ways that foreclose symbolic action. There is a fundamental incompatibility, in other words, between being truly present to the vibrant world, in both its human and extrahuman aspects, and our inclination to communicate about that world or extract meaning from it. Presence may have inherent meaning, but it is never of the order that brooks interpretation. It may be experienced, even expressed, but to do one is to eclipse the other.

This insight has been described in a variety of ways by those who worry that our encounters—with language, images, people, things—lose something of their essential vitality when we attempt to produce or appropriate their meaning. For Diane Davis it's a matter of acknowledging rhetoric's nonhermeneutic dimension. The nonhermeneutic encounter, she writes, is "not reducible to meaning making, to offering up signs and symbols for comprehension" (2010, 67), because "the experience of the encounter is not a positive event that you could later grasp but a withdrawal of meaning" (75). We might say that a photograph becomes inessential when meaning withdraws from an encounter and the relationality immanent to it becomes foregrounded instead. W. J. T. Mitchell makes the point by suggesting we should "make the relationality of image and beholder the field of investigation" (2005, 49). Images, that is, shouldn't be "turned into language" (47) and run through a "ready-made template for interpretive mastery" (49)—though I think that's just what happens when so many snapshots are taken and shared online. The danger is that we sap the power of our encounters by restricting their openness. As Susan Sontag warned decades before Davis and Mitchell, "To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world—in order to set up a shadow world of 'meanings.' It is to turn the world into *this* world" (1966, 7).

Why did I not take a photograph of that encounter with death after the storm in Varanasi? The huddled masses had dispersed. No one was interfering. The occasion was certainly picturesque with regard to such formal qualities as light, color, texture, subject. Given that we live in a culture inclined to grant that images are meaningful and hence powerful, taking that photo would have been empowering. From the inescapable vantage of our humanness, though, it is humans that attribute meaning and power to images. "We can recognize the power of the image," Janet Wolff writes, "while understanding full well that that power is (socially, culturally, perhaps

politically) *given* to it” (2012, 6). When we do so, imposing meaning on a scene by capturing it in a photograph, for instance, we miss out on what meaning cannot convey. As Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht puts it, in the imposition of meaning, “we seem to attenuate, inevitably, the impact that this thing can have on our bodies and senses” (2004, xiv). Such an impact is not built by human hands alone. The rhetorical power we ascribe to images, evident in our photo-crazed moment, is only their second-order power. An image’s first-order power exists beyond the capacity of humans or symbolic action to confer; it derives from what its pictorial materialization will invariably lack: the self-sufficient intensity of an encounter’s affective potential.

A PYRE, SUNKEN EYES

The Indian city of Varanasi is an excellent example of affective intensity in part because, in being there, one cannot help but feel so very *there*. Animal and human life mingle on the streets. Cows walk among rickshaws and mopeds. Garbage and excrement mar the narrow roads among the rubble of ruined buildings. The dead go through security like any other luggage at the airport. They say nowhere in India is it easier to get sick than Varanasi. It’s a visceral place, the India of the Western imagination: crowded, colorful, sublime, and excruciating all at once. All of which make it quintessentially photogenic—both in the sense that it looks good in pictures and in the biological sense that it produces or emits its own light.

Appropriately enough, Varanasi is also sometimes called Banaras, or Kashi, meaning “city of light.” Its radiance derives largely from its status among Hindus as the holiest city in the world. In the Hindu tradition, Varanasi represents the entire cosmos, which means that *all* places, sacred and profane, are said to coexist there either symbolically or concretely—a phenomenon that geographers call “spatial transposition” (Gesler and Pierce 2000, 224–25). The *mahatmyas* to Varanasi, glorifying hymns of praise, laud the city for having “all the organizing forces of space and time” within its sacred boundaries (Eck 1982, 24). And the Ganges (“Ganga” to locals) is the quintessential embodiment of Kashi’s holiness. Along the stretch of river that shores the old city’s center, a long bank of steep and broad concrete steps rise from the water toward the city above. These “ghats” accommodate the city’s thriving mass of humanity (and animality) as it performs its daily rituals along or in the river. Though we didn’t know it at the time, the ghat where my wife and I sought shelter from the sudden monsoon that day was

the Harishchandra ghat, one of two sacred sites in the city devoted to ritual cremation. The building that gave us shelter was an electric crematorium, although bodies were also burned on pyres of banyan and sandalwood down by the water's edge.

Throughout most of India, cremation grounds—the “shmathana”—are located outside of town; they're regarded as dirty and inauspicious, and when bereaved family members return home from them, they're expected to undergo rites of purification (Eck, 32). But not in Varanasi. In Varanasi, cremation ghats are “the most auspicious of places” (33). Hindus believe that people cremated there achieve *moksha*, their soul's eternal escape from the cycle of *samsara*, which otherwise relegates all souls to the suffering of perpetual reincarnation. As a result of this belief, thousands of pilgrims journey to Varanasi each year to die. The city teems with death. It is, paradoxically, alive with it.

In the days that followed the incredible storm, we found ourselves returning time and again to the same place at Harishchandra. We sat and watched the ritual burning for hours. We watched family members negotiate an agreeable price for wood. We watched the bodies, wrapped in colorful fabrics and tied on bamboo gurneys, be carried down to the water and submerged five times. We watched hands cup water from the river and pour it into the corpse's mouth. And we watched the bodies, purified by holy Ganga, be brought to the pyre and lit from the same eternal flame they say has burned there for thousands of years, ceaselessly, day and night. Then, unforgettably, we watched the closest of surviving kin silently stoke the fire with a bamboo pole, sometimes for three hours or more. Before long the dead's eyes sink in, cheeks disappear into the hollowness of a skull. The smell is indescribable. And the wailing of the women, forbidden from tending to the fire—you could hear it from blocks away.

One of the reasons I am going to such lengths to describe Varanasi is to test the capacity of aesthetic expression to represent the sheer vitality of being there. My declining to take a photo after the storm indicated, in part, my sense of futility in the face of the unrepresentable. But even if I had taken a photograph, and even if it could have fully captured the nuance and richness of the event in terms appropriate to its singularity, the interpretive drive to derive meaning from the photo would have failed to articulate the moment's vibrant assemblage of rain/steps/sneezing cow/floating shit/dead body and so forth. So what then?

Jacques Rancière (2007) considers this problem by suggesting it's a nonstarter. For Rancière, the problem is not that some things are

unrepresentable, at least not “in the sense that the language for conveying it does not exist” (126). Indeed, such language and syntax do exist, Rancière says. And presumably we need only refer to well-wrought figurative painting or realist literature to see it in action, where we might behold the evocative capacities of representation within what he calls “the aesthetic regime” of the arts. The problem, in other words, is not that no language *can* convey the experience but that “the language that conveys the experience is in no way specific to it” (126). Art’s aesthetic regime is too catholic. To deem an event unrepresentable, then, is not to say it can’t vividly, evocatively, and sensually be represented but rather to confront “the impossibility of an experience being told in its own appropriate language” (126).

Is there an appropriate language to represent a cremation event in Varanasi? Rancière does not have an answer. But what he does give us is a new way to understand the aliveness of the experienced world, human and nonhuman. The search for an aesthetic worthy of its particular expressivity is accordingly a political ploy to take the things of the world on their own merit. In their emplaced relationship to one another, these things from everyday life have an affectability that rhetoric’s long-standing insistence on symbolicity has a hard time identifying. In our endeavors to represent such affects through language or through a photo, in our efforts to capture their vitality, we move to a different kind of rhetoric: one removed from the immanence of the rhetorical in everyday life itself. Rhetoric, in other words, does not alone represent the expressible through varieties of symbolic action, whether linguistic, visual, or otherwise. The ineffable itself has a rhetorical quality.

Rhetorical theory through most of the twentieth century could not imagine a rhetoric of the ineffable because it was married to presumptions about rhetoric’s symbolicity and human basis. Under such presumptions, if the ineffable lies beyond what can be expressed through human symbolic communication, it also lies beyond rhetoric. This position is probably best exemplified by Richard McKeon’s claim that rhetoric’s subject is the expressible and hence that what cannot be expressed lacks a rhetorical existence (1968, 115–16; 1970, 108–110). For McKeon, the idea that rhetoric is confined to the expressible meant that it operated principally through words, though we now widely recognize the rhetorical in material and visual expressions as well. Even so, visual and material rhetorics are too easily treated as surrogates for language and hence as the same old symbolic representations but with new wineskins. Not until scholars more recently began to shift away from representation altogether, attending instead to affectability and the

vital interconnectedness of all things, was it ever possible to acknowledge that the ineffable might have a rhetorical existence in itself.

Of course, McKeon or others might object that insofar as I've managed to describe some of my Varanasi experience, it's not ineffable at all. And if the ineffability then rests in the dissuasion to photograph, that's only a private internalization, so how is it rhetorical? But I am not suggesting that because people are sometimes privately moved in ways they can't explain we should understand *all* private and arresting experiences that seem to defy description as rhetorical. Doing so hardly seems possible considering that others may well not hear the call and take pictures unreservedly (as I witnessed museum goers do at the Magritte exhibit). The ability of human communication to approximate an experience with vivid intensity does not remove the inevitable differential between lived experience and expressed experience. The ineffable is inexpressible not just *because* of the remainder between what can be represented and what cannot. Rather, the ineffable *is* that remainder; it is that for which there is no adequate expression, nor can be.

Insofar as, historically, the ineffable has been associated with God, then to the extent we acknowledge, first, that some remainder always exists between expression and experience and, second, that this remainder is what we call the ineffable, some readers might come away with a sense that God's ineffability is immanent in all things. The more secular thrust of the matter, however, is that all experience has an ineffable aspect to which we may or may not be attuned and which therefore won't always consciously condition our expressive actions. To rule out the ineffable's rhetoricity by constraining rhetoric's scope to the expressible is to forget Augustine's insight that the ineffability of the ineffable *can* be expressed (that's what the word "ineffable" does). It's the ineffable itself that cannot. As Augustine observed of God, "If that is ineffable which cannot be spoken, then that is not ineffable which can be called ineffable" (1958, 11). But for this paradox to hold, we need not imagine God or some kind of mystical experience as the only sources of the ineffable. To endeavor not to express what appears inadequately expressible is to be affected by the rhetorical power of the ineffable that is always among us—even in a rat, a bench, a microwave oven.

PUZZLES, SMOKE

As it turns out, photographs aren't permitted at the cremation ghats. My instinct had been right. The prohibition against photography there

is understandable. We need no explanation for its motivation: respect the dead; respect the bereaved. However, this prohibition is ineffective. People *do* take photos there after all. Getty Images, the stock photo repository, will sell you photos of the cremation ghats to be used for commercial ends. YouTube will show you footage. Photos of the cremation ghats have even been made into jigsaw puzzles you can buy online right now. In time, even I took them: at sunrise, from a boat we had hired to row us out onto the Ganges, in part for that purpose. The prohibition against photographing the cremation ghats, then, does not make taking photos there impossible or even all that difficult. It just makes doing so indecorous.

But if my inquiry here has been at all successful, it has showed that the likes of decorum—and the whole gamut of other human motivations or “laws” that circumscribe us—cannot alone account for the ineffable rhetoric that surrounds us in the concatenation of things. This does not mean that such things *literally*, through physical force or under threat of an identifiable consequence, prevent us from taking pictures. It is rather that our encounters sometimes have such power that they momentarily enchant us with an intensity that renders taking a picture of them simply irrelevant. *Photos have nothing to do with these encounters*—in both connotations of the phrase “nothing to do with.” The two aren’t related, and there is nothing picturing can *do* that would not attenuate the encounter’s presence.

It is Bruno Latour’s observation, in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), that such binaries as nature/culture, subject/object, and humans/things have never reflected the ontological tangle that actually constitutes reality. The underlying monism of Latour’s thinking has a long history—Spinoza, Whitehead, Deleuze, others—and has inspired the new materialism and affect theory toward which I’ve shown an affinity here. But the implications of decentering the human, of thinking beyond our drive for symbolic meaning, remain mostly unexplored when it comes to visual rhetoric in particular (see Gries 2015 for an outstanding exception). One reason for this, as I intimated at the outset, is that one cannot get *outside* meaning and representation when trying to make sense of what they cannot convey. What we can do is commit attention to how embodied encounters in dynamic ecologies create attunements to things in world-disclosing rather than world-foreclosing ways.

My encounter in Varanasi makes a convenient example because the city itself exemplifies the immanence implied by monist ontologies. In the Hindu tradition, Varanasi is the city of Shiva, the uncategorizable, the many-sided god of creation and destruction, order and disorder, revelation

and concealment. Shiva is the god that most “challenges any facile distinctions between sacred and profane, rich and poor, high and low” (Eck, 99). And Varanasi, Shiva’s city, does the same. In flattening these distinctions Varanasi is the geographical enactment of the new materialist embrace of a flat ontology of social reality. To Hindus, the city of Varanasi is a projection of *sacred reality*, a place where the transformation from nonhuman to human, death to life, and vice versa happens so regularly as to become ordinary (Flood 1993, 1–6). The cremation ghats are but one of the more conspicuous sites of the Shiva-like embedment of the sacred within the everyday.

Though my own status as an outsider in Varanasi undoubtedly disposed me to dwell in its wonder in a way that locals there, amid the routines of their daily lives, probably don’t, the cultural relativity of the out-of-place does not diminish its affectability. To some degree, any out-of-place is always already in place. But, as Joshua Reeves highlights in an important essay from 2013, encounters with the out-of-place rhetorically force us to confront and inquire into the unfamiliar and foreign. By foregrounding the out-of-place (*atopoi*) instead of attending to rhetoric’s traditional interest in commonplaces (*topoi*), Reeves shows that encounters with the former reorient our ways of identifying with normalcy and the everyday attunements that condition how we make sense of our world and arrive at appropriate ways to be within it. But it’s not just that there are some things we occasionally encounter—a weirdly poignant pile of trash, a dead body on wet steps—that stand out as unusual and that therefore are marked as being ineffable. In addition, Reeves suggests that if one bothers to give an encounter with the out-of-place one’s “creative engagement” (321), then that encounter opens up the possibility of a reoriented presence to the world’s cultural, temporal, material, and geospatial complexity. In Varanasi, the city’s whole social organization flattens the “facile distinctions” between beginning and end, life and death, sacred and profane. It is, like Hindu cosmology itself, a city that witnesses a never-ending cycle of pilgrims coming and going, a new river always flowing on, death and rebirth and eternal escape, again and again in the smoke merging with the clouds. Actually to be there, embodied and emplaced, is to feel this sublime, coextensive world viscerally all around. It is to be reminded that we are always in the middle of a processual relationality with everything human and nonhuman surrounding us. We are always “in the midst of it,” as Brian Massumi says (2011, 1). At the cremation ghats certainly, the funereal system’s incorporation into everyday life is self-sustaining, just as the flame never dies but passes only from fire to fire to fire again.

If we imagine, even speculatively, that ineffable dissuasion can arise from the world itself and not just from human invention, then we open ourselves up to the autotelic value of being present for an encounter's continual unfolding. We pause. Maybe we put the camera down. We treat the world, with all its grisly things, as something that needs no translation into a picture or language that would never achieve a "nonappropriative relation" (Davis 2010, 77) to it anyway. Even when such ineffable deterrents are merely felt, intuited as if by a whispering voice, this voice is speaking clearly, saying what Augustine said long ago: love calls us to the things of the world.⁵ If absence is one condition for a picture's emergence, it is not just the "presence-absence" that constitutes a picture's visual logic but the absence *of* presence that entices us back to an immediate and loving relation with the world around us.

In this article, I have tried to consider what ineffable deterrents to photography might tell us about encounters with an occasionally out-of-place world we are otherwise so willing to give photos the power to represent. That this inquiry has ended with a turn toward religion should come as no great surprise. After all, perhaps the most famous prohibition against the creation of pictures is the biblical entreaty, in Exodus 20:4, not to make "any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth." The biblical prohibition casts a wide net. But if ineffable deterrents against photography call us to attend with more presence to a reassembled social world, maybe the wide berth suggests there is never *not* an occasion to enact this loving immediacy.

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NOTES

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1. Methodologically, this puts my project in league with Alfred North Whitehead's speculative philosophy, which "embodies the method of the 'working hypothesis'" (1967, 222). For some readers, such a method may seem vulnerable to circular reasoning. But any working hypothesis—in my case, that dissuasion can come from the world itself—requires one to admit as relevant the sorts of evidence that follow in consequence, though such evidence may not be admissible in the context of certain hypotheses about reality.

2. For stylistic reasons, in this article I sometimes use "picture" interchangeably with "photograph," though I understand photos to be *kinds* of pictures. Meanwhile, the

primary kind of photography I refer to is the *snapshot* (as distinguished from professional, time-lapse, photojournalism, etc.).

3. John Berger: "If everything that existed were continually being photographed, every photograph would become meaningless" (2001, 216).

4. For more on the sublime, photography, and representation, see Stormer 2004.

5. I'm alluding to an allusion. See Richard Wilbur (2006, 307–8). Wilbur appears to have taken his title from the famous passage in Augustine's confessions: "I have learnt to love you late! . . . The beautiful things of this world kept me far from you and yet, if they had not been in you, they would have no being at all" (1961, 231–32).



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