

Notes: on Colin Miner: the illuminated becoming blind
By Jacqueline Mabey

Spooked

We should begin, then, with the ghosts.

Benjamin referred to the fog that obscures the beginnings of photography. Patrilineal anxiety around origins, about the one true Father. Sideways glances over kitchen tables—every child has a mother but one's father is always in doubt. (The family, of course, is the institutional center of story-telling and myth-making, where we learn the worlding-function of the performative utterance.) Who was the first? What was their method? Quick, get the story straight, this is what it is, *this is what it was always meant to be*. Teleological narratives of photography come to dominate: the predestined progression to mechanical transcendence from a series of entertaining aberrations and failed science experiments.

TRANSCENDENCE! To leave the corrupt and corrupting body behind. Here, the origins of the modern scientific method. Objectivity and the anxiety of influence, objectivity as defined by our *lack*, our absence, the belief that we can only know the truth when we have no part in it.

But to have the light of truth reach the celluloid flesh unmolested by human desire? Rejoice, oh brothers and sisters! A conduit of uncompromised verisimilitude.

PHOTOGRAPHY IS ROOTED IN REALITY

Ah, yes, but reality is quite the production! Page upon page of technical prose delineating the laboriousness of conforming to the conventions of reality—the set up, the framing, the lighting, the equipment. Narratives of mastery and skill, so much *work*, so much effort and worry about getting it right.

What is the temporality of anxiety? To be anxious is to be paralyzed in the present by a plague of potential futures. To be anxious is to be haunted, to live with the ghosts of past and future (in)actions, iterations, lines of flight, the *would have, could have, should have*, the paralyzing thought: *what if?* Like a horse spooked rears back and dances, the anxious heart knows no quiet.ⁱ

You can try to fix the image but it will never stick. The temporality of the photograph is not the "there then" but contains the kernel of potential futures, held in eternal yet-could-be.

A multitude of noisy ghosts call out to us, fill our waking hours with unease and our nights with restlessness. They remind us of other possible presents, and other whispers of the past. Like an afterimage they linger, belated, persistent, refusing easy reconciliation.

cf. Hippolyte Bayard's *Self Portrait as a Drowned Man* (1840). Bayard, playing the lonely suicide, offers himself up as a living ghost, sent to pester the State and the law of the Father.ⁱ How that picture haunts me. The hat to the left, the "rotting" hands neatly folded. The body's posture as if dreaming. An avaricious image, a seductive, uneasy fiction, right from the very start.

But what, then, is a spook? A slur, a specter, a spy.

Spy satellites, the surveillance of stars, black ops and black holes. What is the opposite of surveillance? Recalcitrance, oscillation, play, dissembling. The phantasmagoria is not an aberration but in the genetic make-up of photography.

What would it look like if we embraced our household spirits?

Blue

Blue is a different kind of space, a space between, really. A kind of sudden, soft sinking that separates you from others, as if under a foot of water or a blanket of snow. Life is lived in echo and delay. Sorrow moves slowly, its limbs heavy with memory.

Blue is uncooperative. The blue hour, between light and dark, when the birds cease their singing, is a photographer's dilemma, difficult to capture. Non-photo blue, mark making that does not register on film. The opacity of sex, the other blue.

Indigo from aniline, they thought it could treat sleeping sickness. Blue to cure contagion, blue to cure the body swelling beyond its bounds (underneath the skin the ache incubates). But what to cure the blue?

From the outside, blue is near illegible, difficult to understand. Like Charcot's Augustine in her "normal" state, looking back at the camera, defiant. Her catatonia, her hysteria a product of photographic dazzlement as, from the darkness, comes the blinding flash.ⁱⁱⁱ

Blue knows all the stories but isn't one to tell.

Grisaille

On one end of the grayscale there's celestial silver, the color of the moon and the tinfoil ships we make to take us there as children. We turn our eyes up toward the silvery moon to wonder.^{iv} The color of camp, of glam, of grown up play. A site of fantasy, of fiction, silver reflects our desire back at us. It is the desire for the new, the different, the other.

But I could get lost in the ghostly gray of the scanner light.^v Giving form to digital materiality, with all the richness of a contact print. It's a kind of antagonism, you know, this space of speculation. Tear a page out of a book, cut it up, copy it, copy the copy. A form of disruption, of distancing. Push back, the abstraction of image and text in this new no-where space. It puts it back on me and you, brothers and sisters. This abstraction, a platform for interrogation, for question-asking, stock-taking.

Shedding titles and family names, moving forward in obscurity with the somatic and the spectral, a new worlding.

The point is to haunt the algorithm. The point is to not give up the ghost.

-Jacqueline Mabey, New York, May 2013

ⁱ "Alas," said the mouse, "the whole world is growing smaller every day. At the beginning it was so big that I was afraid, I kept running and running, and I was glad when I saw walls far away to the right and left, but these long walls have narrowed so quickly that I am in the last chamber already, and there in the corner stands the trap that I must run into."

"You only need to change your direction," said the cat, and ate it up." -Franz Kafka, "A Little Fable," 1931

ⁱⁱ On the back of the photograph is written: *The corpse which you see here is that of M. Bayard, inventor of the process that has just been shown to you. As far as I know this indefatigable experimenter has been occupied for about three years with his discovery. The Government which has been only too generous to Monsieur Daguerre, has said it can do nothing for Monsieur Bayard, and the poor wretch has drowned himself. Oh the vagaries of human life....! ... He has been at the morgue for several days, and no-one has recognized or claimed him. Ladies and gentlemen, you'd better pass along for fear of offending your sense of smell, for as you can observe, the face and hands of the gentleman are beginning to decay.*

ⁱⁱⁱ "The flash takes you by surprise, no matter how long in advance you have been warned. It cuts into a scene with the violence of the lightning bolt and yet instantly displaces attention from itself to the darkness of its surroundings. Presumably you recover, only momentarily blinded by an excess of artificial light, and try to regain your composure. The flash creates a physical disorientation that corresponds on an experiential level to the philosophical 'disturbance to civilization' produced by looking at the photograph, which signals 'the advent of yourself as other.' An excess of light that promises total (as we will see, illusory) visibility, and that goes out at the same moment that it goes on, the flash cannot be integrated into sensory experience, but only registered belatedly, incompletely, possibly as shock; too much light produces a loss of sight. The flash promises instant revelation of the truth. It occurs as accident, unexpected and impossible to anticipate or parry, even by someone trained to resist it. The resurfacing of cognition that follows, however, may achieve only partial recovery: the flash disorients you, and the subsequent cognitive effort may not fully integrate the moment of disorientation into

memory." Ulrich Baer, "Photography and Hysteria," *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), p. 34.

^{iv} "I believe in continually asking the questions that designing for extraterrestrials implies, because thinking about aliens is a way to think about ourselves and our relationship to the future... . Underlying the question of how to consider aliens is a deeply ethical question, namely what relationship do we want to have to the cosmos, to the stranger and to the future? Should our disposition be pregnant with the nihilism of silent indifference, or should we endeavour to develop an ethical relationship to those symbolic figures, and, by extension, ourselves?" Trevor Paglen, "'Friends of Space, How Are You All? Have You Eaten Yet?' Or, Why Talk to Aliens Even if We Can't," *Afterall* 32 (Spring 2013), p.19.

^v "The picture goes in for Marat's 'things,' as we know his devotees did in general. It insists on the specific forms matter took in this instance. And yet the single most extraordinary feature of the picture, I should say, is its whole upper half being empty. Or rather (here is what is unprecedented), not being empty, exactly, not being a satisfactory representation of nothing or nothing much - of an absence in which whatever the subject is has become present - but something more like a representation of painting, of painting as pure activity. Painting as material, therefore. Aimless. In the end detached from any one representational task. Bodily." T.J. Clark, "Painting in the Year 2," from *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 45.