BELIEVING IS SEEING
Errol Morris
Believing Is Seeing
(Observations On The Mysteries Of Photography)

THE PENGUIN PRESS
NEW YORK 2011
BELIEVING IS SEEING: OBSERVATIONS ON THE MYSTERIES OF PHOTOGRAPHY  
Errol Morris  

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These essays appeared in different form as the author’s blog on the Web site of The New York Times.  

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CRIMEAN WAR ESSAYS
INTENTIONS OF
THE PHOTOGRAPHER
CHAPTER 1

Which Came First, the Chicken or the Egg?

Part 1

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act

Falls the Shadow . . .

— T. S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men"

"You mean to tell me that you went all the way to the Crimea because of one sentence written by Susan Sontag?" My friend Ron Rosenbaum seemed incredulous. I told him, "No, it was actually two sentences."

The sentences in question are from Sontag's Regarding the Pain of Others, her last published book.

Here are the two sentences:

Not surprisingly, many of the canonical images of early war photography turn out to have been staged, or to have had their subjects tampered with. After reaching the much-shelled valley approaching Sebastopol in his horse-drawn darkroom, [Roger] Fenton made two exposures from the same tripod position: in the first version of the celebrated photo he was to call "The Valley of the Shadow of Death" (despite the title, it was not across this landscape that the Light Brigade made its doomed charge),
the cannonballs are thick on the ground to the left of the road, but before taking the second picture—the one that is always reproduced—he oversaw the scattering of the cannonballs on the road itself.

To give a little background, in 1855 Roger Fenton, a well-regarded British photographer, was sent by the publisher Thomas Agnew & Sons to photograph the ongoing war in the Crimea between British, French, and Turkish forces on one side and Russian forces on the other. For four months, from March 8 to June 26, 1855, Fenton and his assistant, John Sparling, worked from a horse-drawn darkroom behind the British front lines. They produced 360 photographs, of which the pair entitled “Valley of the Shadow of Death” are the best known.

Despite the iconic status of the photographs, they are not illustrated in Sontag’s book. Sontag provided no photographs in her book, only references to photographs. I will make this a little easier for the reader. Here are the two Fenton photographs taken, according to Sontag, “from the same tripod position.” I have given them the names: OFF and ON. OFF for the photograph with cannonballs off the road and ON for the photograph with cannonballs on the road.
I have spent a considerable amount of time looking at the two photographs and thinking about Sontag's two sentences. Sontag, of course, does not claim that Fenton altered either photograph after taking them—only that he altered, or "staged," the second photograph by altering the landscape that was photographed. But how did Sontag know that Fenton altered the landscape or, for that matter, "oversaw the scattering of the cannonballs on the road itself"?

Surely, any evidence of this would have to be found independent of the photographs. We don't see Fenton (or anyone else for that matter) in either of the photographs bending down as if to pick up or put down a cannonball. How does Sontag know what Fenton was doing or why he was doing it? To up the ante, Sontag's sentence also suggests a certain laziness on Fenton's part, as if he himself couldn't be bothered picking up or putting down a cannonball but instead supervised or oversaw their placement. One can imagine the imperious Fenton: "Hey, you over there. Pick up that cannonball and move it on to the road. No, not there. A little more to the left." Or maybe it wasn't laziness. Maybe he had a bad back. The incapacitated Fenton: "Boy, my back is killing me. Would you mind picking up a few cannonballs and carrying them on to the road?"

While I was wrestling with these questions, it occurred to me that there was an even deeper question. How did Sontag know the sequence of the photographs? How
did she know which photograph came first, OFF or ON? Presumably, there had to be some additional information that allowed the photographs to be ordered: before and after. If this is the basis for her claim that the second photograph was staged, shouldn’t she offer some evidence?

There are no footnotes in Sontag’s book, but fortunately there is an acknowledgment section at the end:

I owe the information that there were two versions of Fenton’s “The Valley of the Shadow of Death” to Mark Haworth-Booth of the Victoria and Albert Museum; both are reproduced in The Ultimate Spectacle: A Visual History of the Crimean War, by Ulrich Keller (Routledge, 2001).

I bought a copy of Ulrich Keller’s book and turned immediately to the section in Chapter 4 on the two photographs. I found the following passage where Keller lays claim to a number of historical discoveries—namely that there are two photographs, that the photographs are slightly different, and that the cannonballs in the second photograph were placed there either by Fenton or under Fenton’s direction.

Here is the text (the italics are mine):

A slight but significant difference between Fenton’s two pictures of the site seems to have escaped the attention of photographic historians. The first variant obviously represents the road to the trenches in the state in which the photographer found it, with the cannonballs lining the side of the road. In a second version we discover a new feature. Some round-shot is now demonstratively distributed all over the road surface—as if the balls had just been hurled there, exposing the photographer to a hail of fire. Not content with the peaceful state of things recorded in the first picture, Fenton obviously rearranged the evidence in order to create a sense of drama and danger that had originally been absent from the scene.

In turn, this passage references a footnote where Keller further expands on his claims about Fenton’s personality:

That Fenton tended to exaggerate the dangers of his photographic campaign, too, can be gathered from “The Daily News” of September 20, 1855, which lists a series of his close calls, such as his operating van . . . being frequently an object of suspicion with the Russians; himself being wounded by a shell; his assistant shot in the hand by a ball from a Minié rifle.
But where is the exaggeration here? There is nothing in the *Daily News* article to support Keller's claim. If anything, the article contradicts what Keller is saying. Is Keller arguing that Fenton made false claims to the journalist from the *Daily News* (with the possibility, of course, that it was the journalist, and not Fenton, who exaggerated what Fenton said)? Does Keller know that the van was not “an object of suspicion with the Russians” or that Fenton’s assistant, Sparling, was not “shot in the hand by a ball from a Minié rifle”? Where does Keller show that these claims are false? Fenton himself had written:

The picture was due to the precaution of the driver [Sparling] on that day, who suggested as there was a possibility of a stop being put in that valley to the further travels of both vehicle and driver, it would be showing a proper consideration for both to take a likeness of them before starting.

Again, a possible exaggeration or misstatement, but supposedly Sparling was concerned that he might be making a one-way trip to the front.

ILLUSTRATION #7
SPARLING, FENTON'S ASSISTANT

Which Came First, the Chicken or the Egg?
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Keller says that the first photograph *obviously* “represents the road... in which the
photographer found it” (OFF) and Fenton *obviously* “rearranged the evidence,” that
is the cannonballs, in the second photograph (ON).

As I’ve said elsewhere: *nothing* is so obvious that it’s obvious. When someone
says that something is *obvious*, it seems almost certain that it is anything but obvi-
ous—even to them. The use of the word “obvious” indicates the absence of a logical
argument—an attempt to convince the reader by asserting the truth of a statement
just by saying it a little louder.

Soon after I read his book, I called Keller to discuss his claims about Fenton,
which were repeated by Sontag.

ERROL MORRIS: I became aware of your book on Fenton [The Ultimate Spec-
tacle] from reading Susan Sontag. She talks about your analysis of the two
photographs captioned “The Valley of the Shadow of Death.” And suggests
that Fenton posed one of the photographs.

ULRICH KELLER: Yes.

ERROL MORRIS: She seems to have taken most of that material wholesale
from you.

ULRICH KELLER: Yes, I guess one could say that. Yes.

ERROL MORRIS: What interests me is this idea that one of the photographs
was posed. That one of the photographs is a fake.

ULRICH KELLER: It has been sort of retouched or interfered with to get some
drama into it that wasn’t originally in it. I wouldn’t go so far as to say it’s a
fake, but it’s deceptive. Certainly.

ERROL MORRIS: Deceptive in what way?

ULRICH KELLER: Well, deceptive in that it creates the impression that the pic-
ture was taken under great danger when that was not the case.

ERROL MORRIS: Both pictures?

ULRICH KELLER: The second one. It’s clear that the one with cannonballs on
the surface of the road must be later, obviously.

ERROL MORRIS: Why?

ULRICH KELLER: Well, because of two pictures, one has the cannonballs rest-
ing in the ditch there to the side [OFF] and the other one has them on the
surface of the road [ON]. It’s much, much more likely to assume that Fenton
would have taken these balls out of the ditch and onto the road rather than
the other way round. What motivation would he have had to take cannon-
balls that were on the road and remove them? Why would he do that? So I
think it’s pretty obvious. But you have doubts about that?

ERROL MORRIS: Yes. I have wondered how you came to the conclusion
that the one with the cannonballs on the road [ON] has to be the second
photograph. You suggest that Fenton was not in danger but wanted to ratchet
up the drama of the scene by making it look as though he were under attack.
That Fenton wanted to convey a false impression of derring-do to the prospective viewer of the photograph. But why do you believe that? I may not be phrasing this very well. If not, my apology.

ULRICH KELLER: Well, I can see a motivation for him to take the balls out of the ditch and put them in the middle of the road. That makes sense to me. It's something that I think is plausible for someone to do. The other way around, I don't know why anyone would do that. I don't think it's likely.

ERROL MORRIS: Is it the absence of an explanation that makes "the other way around" unlikely or implausible?

ULRICH KELLER: Yes.

But is it so implausible for Fenton to have removed the balls from the road? As Ann Petrone, my researcher, told me, "Of course the balls were taken off the road. Didn't they need to use the road?" She calls it the commonsense solution.

There also could be artistic reasons. Fenton could have liked the aesthetic quality that the barren road would have given him. He could have left the balls on the road for the first picture (ON) and then taken them off the road for the second (OFF), because he preferred the simplicity of the latter. Maybe he saw the balls on the road and felt they looked fake, and removed them in the interest of creating a more honest picture.

In Keller's book, there is a letter from Fenton to his wife dated April 24, 1855. This is an excerpt:

Yesterday after finishing the last picture of the Panorama I got Sir John to lend me a couple of mules to take my caravan down to a ravine known by the name of the valley of the shadow of Death from the quantity of Russian balls which have fallen in it... We were detained in setting off & so got down just about 3PM yesterday. I took the van down nearly as far as I intended it to go & then went forward to find out the chosen spot. I had scarcely started when a dash up of dust behind the battery before us showed something was on the road to us, we could not see it but another flirt of earth nearer showed that it was coming straight & in a moment we saw it bounding up towards us. It turned off when near & where it went I did not see as a shell came over about the same spot knocked it [sic] fuse out & joined the mass of its brethren without bursting. It was plain that the line of fire was upon the very spot I had chosen, so very reluctantly I put up with another reach of the valley about 100 yds short of the best point. I brought the van down & fixed the camera & while leveling it another ball came in a more slanting direction touching the rear of the battery as the others but instead of coming up the road bounded on to the hill on our left about 50 yards from us & came down right to us stopping at our feet. I picked it up put it into the van & hope to make you a present of it. After this no more...
came near though plenty passed up on each side. We were there an hour & a half an [sic] got 2 good pictures returning back in triumph with our trophies finishing the days work but taking the van to the mortar battery on the top of the hill in front of the light division.

Here are the facts that emerge from the letter:

1. The photographs were taken on April 23, 1855—the day before the letter was written.
2. Fenton took the photographs in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, so named because of “the quantity of Russian cannonballs that had fallen there.”
3. The two photographs were taken between 3:00 p.m. and 5:00 p.m. They arrived “about 3PM” and stayed “about an hour & a half.”
4. Fenton and his assistant set up in a hazardous location and then retreated one hundred yards up the road. Even though the location was no longer directly in the line of fire, they were still at considerable risk.
5. Fenton took one of the cannonballs as a trophy to present to his wife.

The letter is a godsend. It provides an extraordinary amount of useful information. Without it, we would probably not be able to determine when and where the photographs were taken. But the letter makes no reference to the order of the photographs nor to the question of whether the cannonballs were put on or taken off the road.

I continued reading Keller’s book but found no reference to Fenton overseeing the scattering of the cannonballs. I began to wonder: If it’s not in Fenton’s letters, where did this idea come from? Which came first? Did Keller first make a conjecture about the order of the photographs based on Fenton’s (real or imagined) intentions, or did Keller first have a specific piece of historical information—such as something Fenton had written—that he based the order on? If Fenton had written to his wife, for example, that he had overseen the scattering of the balls, then the question would be laid to rest. At least we would know that Fenton had claimed to have done that, regardless of whether he actually did it.

My next interview was with Mark Haworth-Booth, the former curator of photography at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Haworth-Booth, of course, was Sontag’s primary source. He was the one who referred her to Ulrich Keller’s monograph on Fenton, and I was of course interested in the details of how this all happened.

MARK HAWORTH-BOOTH: Mark Holborn, Sontag’s editor in London, called me and told me that Sontag was looking for some material about Fenton, and I sent him some photocopies of a thing I’d written a long time ago. He passed them on to her, and she was very grateful. She didn’t really quote them very accurately. She overstated what I said, which is very characteristic of
her writing. It became much more black and white and strident than it was when I said it. I was raising doubts, but she assumed that my doubts were a matter of fact rather than speculation. Anyway, I was very grateful for the nice acknowledgment.

ERROL MORRIS: And the nature of the speculation?

MARK HAWORTH-BOOTH: Well, I noticed that there are two versions of the "Valley of the Shadow of Death" about twenty-five years ago, and it made me think: one of the pictures is clearly much more interesting and expressive than the other. So I began to wonder if Fenton and his assistant helped the composition by moving the cannonballs themselves. That's what I raised as a speculation.

ERROL MORRIS: Hold on just one second. My aging dog wants to get up on a chair. Well, the issue of the two Fenton photographs, were you the first to notice that?

MARK HAWORTH-BOOTH: As far as I'm aware. Other people have claimed it, but they claimed it many years after me. The main person I'm aware of who thinks he was the first, the man who did the book on all the different representations of the Crimean War. I think his name is Ulrich Keller.

ERROL MORRIS: Yes. I've spoken to him. I'm familiar with the book.

MARK HAWORTH-BOOTH: Good. His book is terrific. Anyway, he thought he had invented the idea. But I had published it in 1981, so I'm kind of a long way in the lead of him. I mean, it's certainly pretty obvious, but no one that I'm aware of had noticed it before. I just happened to have two books open on my desk at the same time when I was having lunch, and I noticed this difference between the two photographs.

Over the years, I myself had seen the ON photograph many, many times in books, and invariably it came with a caption that told you what to think about the photograph. It was often described as the first real photograph of war. You were told that from the cannonballs strewn across the landscape, you should infer unseen carnage. The photograph was mysterious, but the mystery is compounded when you learn that there are actually two photographs. And the mystery is further compounded when those two photographs are ordered for you and you are told what that order represents.

Even though Haworth-Booth and Keller disagree about who first discovered the twin photographs, they do agree that OFF was first and ON second. They also agree that Fenton, in all likelihood, posed the second photograph. However, as Haworth-Booth suggested in my interview with him, this is not a view shared by all museum curators of photography. Gordon Baldwin, recently retired as a curator from the
J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, has his own views on the order of the two photographs. After my conversation with Haworth-Booth, I called him up.

**ERROL MORRIS:** I'm interested in two photographs—the two versions of Fenton's "Valley of the Shadow of Death."

**GORDON BALDWIN:** Okay, excellent. As you perhaps have heard, I have strong opinions on the subject.

**ERROL MORRIS:** Ah. I am more than interested.

**GORDON BALDWIN:** Well, I've written an essay—not a very long one—the Folio Society is publishing a book in a few months called *The Hundred Greatest Photographs*. I wrote three essays for the book and that's one of them. I think there's a clear explanation for what happened—why there are two photographs and why they're different. And I think earlier readings in which people have thought that Fenton was moving cannonballs around are erroneous. I don't think he moved cannonballs around. The cannonballs were harvested, so to speak, by soldiers who were there. The place that Fenton went to make the photograph—there are accounts in the *Illustrated London News* about that place, and in that account that appeared they talk about the fact that the soldiers harvested the cannonballs in order to fire them back.

**ERROL MORRIS:** Recycled them?

**GORDON BALDWIN:** Yeah, recycling. Heavy-duty recycling. I think that's what happened. I don't know if you've had the chance to look at Fenton's correspondence on the subject of "Valley of the Shadow of Death," but there are two different letters that he wrote which deal with that place and what happened there. In the first one he talked about going to reconnoiter the site—and this is without a camera—and talks about cannonballs so thick on the ground it was difficult to walk without treading on them. Which indicates to me a lot of cannonballs. And then in the second letter where he describes making the photographs, he talks about being under fire. At the time, cannonballs are bouncing around. I don't think that someone who was under fire would have had the time or inclination to be moving cannonballs around, but soldiers might well have done so. There's a correspondent for the *London Times* who describes horses swaybacked from the weight of the cannonballs that they were carrying. Russell, the *Times* correspondent, describes it, and this is part of that recycling process. I think that's what happened. So what people commonly have thought is the first photograph with few cannonballs [OFF] is the second photograph, after some of them have been removed.

**ERROL MORRIS:** What attracted my attention to all of this is a couple of paragraphs in Susan Sontag's last book.

**GORDON BALDWIN:** Oh, dear. Yes, okay. I don't think she's very good on Fenton, frankly, but go ahead.

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ERROL MORRIS: She mentions how one of the Fenton photographs was posed or staged. That we're always disappointed when we learn that a photograph has been posed. Then she goes on to talk about the difference between fake paintings and fake photographs. Namely, a fake painting is a painting with faulty provenance—say, a painting that is purportedly by Vermeer but turns out to be painted by somebody else. But according to Sontag, a fake photograph is a photograph that's been posed. Her example is the purportedly posed photograph by Fenton, what she takes to be the second photograph [ON] in the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

GORDON BALDWIN: There are photographs of which this is quite true, particularly photographs made by Alexander Gardner during the American Civil War, but I don't think that is what Fenton did. Fenton's own work tells us that isn't what happened. I don't think it was like him to have manipulated—to have falsified an image in that way. And one reason I'd say that is: he was simply photographing the place as he found it. I don't think he had an idea about the symbolic—what later people would say was the symbolic value of the photograph. In other words, most of his photographs from the Crimea are documentation of places where battles have occurred. I don't think he meant to make a highly charged photograph. The place was quite well known. He didn't name it the Valley of the Shadow of Death; the soldiers had, and it was named that simply because it was a dangerous place. The ravine was a place where the Russians feared a surreptitious attack would be launched on a position of theirs and to forestall that, they shelled it periodically regardless of whether there were people there. And so it got this nickname. When Fenton went there, he was going to a place he knew about, but I don't think he intended to so weight the image as subsequent critics have. As a metaphor for devastation, it's a wonderful photograph, but I'm not sure that was really his intention in making it. That makes some sense I hope?

ERROL MORRIS: Yes, of course it does. But it is still unusual that he took two photographs. I don't know of any other example—correct me if I'm wrong—where he took a pair of photographs from the same camera position.

GORDON BALDWIN: No, I don't think there is one. I think you're quite right. Certainly when he makes panoramas in the Crimea, the camera is in one place and it's rotated to a degree.

Baldwin is referring to the overlapping photographs that Fenton took from the British encampments. Just as Fenton had made an experiment with time by taking two still pictures from the same camera position, he experimented with space by creating some of the first panoramas.
ERROL MORRIS: Yeah, he’s panning.

GORDON BALDWIN: Yeah, although he’s not terribly skillful at it, to tell the truth. The edges don’t quite line up the way they might. But those are quite different from the photographs in the Valley of the Shadow of Death. He’s there for an hour and a half and comes back with two photographs. His van is drawn by army mules, not by horses in this instant, and with the army mules came a soldier or two. Sparling, his assistant, was there. He was always there. I’ve pulled out the page from the Folio Society book. What Fenton wrote to his wife in this first one, this is a couple of weeks before he made the photographs. “Farther on the balls lay thicker but in coming to a ravine called the valley of death the site passed all imagination. Ground shot and shell lay like a stream at the bottom of the hollow all the way down. You could not walk without treading upon them.” That was written on the fourth of April. On the twenty-fourth of April, when he’s writing again, he writes saying—because he’s been forced to retreat from the camera position he wanted to use, because of being fired at. He writes, “very reluctantly I’ve put up with another reach of the valley, a 100 yards short of the best point. I brought the van down and fixed the camera. . . . We were there an hour and a half and got two good pictures, returning in triumph with our trophy.” He doesn’t say anything about moving cannonballs around. I really don’t think he’s managing the image in that way. Much as I find Ms. Sontag interesting about photography, I don’t think she’s right about Fenton.

ERROL MORRIS: In the book there’s a citation to a monograph by Ulrich Keller. Which I dutifully bought and read.

GORDON BALDWIN: I don’t think he likes Fenton very much. He certainly thinks he’s a creature of the establishment. But how could he not be, in a sense?

ERROL MORRIS: Keller’s argument which was essentially picked up by Sontag, is that Fenton was a coward. Or, if not a coward, that he was a person who was very, very reluctant to expose himself to any real danger. That the cannonballs were rearranged by Fenton—this would be Keller’s argument—to make it look as though he was in greater danger than he was, that the place where he had taken the photograph was something of a tourist attraction for visitors whom you wanted to show a piece of the Crimean War. I hope I’m characterizing it correctly. I believe I am.

GORDON BALDWIN: It was a place that wasn’t very safe to be. It wouldn’t have acquired that name had it not been. The fact that the Illustrated London News sketch artist made a picture at exactly, or very close to, the same point that Fenton’s photograph was made indicates it certainly had a certain renown, and I don’t suppose every nook or fold of the landscape had a name given to it by soldiers.
But I wouldn't have said that Fenton was at all cowardly. I think he was quite an adventurous character. He simply documented what was available to him during the time he was there. He happened to be in the Crimea at a point when there wasn't much fighting going on. The great assault on Sebastopol occurred after he'd left.

ERROL MORRIS: I read that the photograph of Sparling and the van was taken the same day Fenton took the "Valley of the Shadow of Death" picture and that Fenton had taken Sparling's photograph at Sparling's request because Sparling thought that this would be his last day on Earth.

GORDON BALDWIN: Yes, I think that's how the story runs, but I'm not sure where it comes from. I don't have any reason to think that it may not be true, but Sparling is a fairly funny character. He isn't simply Fenton's assistant, although he functioned that way for a long time and advertised himself as being assistant to Mr. Fenton. He was a very smart guy. He wrote a manual on photography that is extraordinarily clear and beautifully phrased, but he didn't have Fenton's class advantages. Sparling asked that the photograph be made because he knew they were going back to this place which was dangerous, which Fenton had been to before—although it doesn't say that Sparling was with him the first time and since he didn't have a camera.
with him when he went out to reconnoiter three weeks before, it's possible Sparling wasn't there. If Sparling thought it was that dangerous, isn't that testimony to the contrary of Keller's contention that Fenton was cowardly?

ERROL MORRIS: Yes, it is. Although it could just be that Sparling was also cowardly.

GORDON BALDWIN: Perhaps. (Laughter.) How far can one extrapolate that? Who else was cowardly? My general view is that Fenton is a more admirable kind of character than Keller thinks. He and I have had some conversation—quite a number of years ago—about Fenton. I simply disagreed with everything he had to say on the subject. I just didn't think the way he was analyzing his character was useful, and I thought that the evidence we have runs to the contrary. The letters, of course—Fenton could not have foreseen that they would be published. And they were published way after his death. The family realized that they were important enough to copy them. The letters that have been published are the result of somebody in the family copying the letters into a book. The letters themselves don't exist. There were two books which descended in different parts of the family. One of them is at Austin and the other one's at Bradford. They vary slightly. They're not exactly the same content, but they preserved the letters and clearly the family felt they were important enough to want to preserve them. He is not writing for the public, and of course he doesn't want to make himself seem unattractive or cowardly to his family or his publisher, since the letters are variously written to his wife, to his brother, and to his publisher. He's just trying to tell about what happened. It's too bad there aren't letters from other periods of his life, but there aren't, except for his official correspondence for the Photographic Society. Clearly, the letters give a picture of a different kind of man than Keller thinks.

Baldwin's view is contrary to Keller's and Sontag's, but his conclusion is still based on psychology—how he interprets Fenton's character and his intentions. Baldwin would order the photographs ON, then OFF, a view also held (more or less) by Malcolm Daniel, the curator of photography at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the author of an article in the recent exhibition catalog, *All the Mighty World: The Photographs of Roger Fenton, 1852–1860*. When I put the question of the order of the photographs to Mr. Daniel, he told me that he too leans toward the recycling theory.

MALCOLM DANIEL: The long and short of it—or the short of it—is: we don't know which of the two pictures came first. For a long time it was thought that the first one would be without the cannonballs on the road [OFF] and that Fenton pulled them out of the ditches and littered the road with them.
to make the picture more dramatic. We now think that the opposite is true. There are references in Fenton's own letters—a reference to British soldiers collecting the cannonballs to fire them back in the other direction. We just can't know. People have sort of assumed that he put more cannonballs there [ON] to make the photograph more dramatic, but it's just speculation. The danger was real, also—as you can tell from the fact that there are cannonballs there at all. It is an area that was certainly within range, and he had this big van that he was carrying along with him, and you remember that Marcus Sparling, his assistant, made him take the picture of Sparling sitting on the photographic van before they went into the Valley of the Shadow of Death because he was worried that they might not come out. So, I don't know. There's no inscription, no documentation, to say which one is first, and so we can speculate that he's making a more dramatic picture or one can say: "Well, we have this reference to soldiers collecting the cannonballs to fire back in the opposite direction, and so it's probably more likely they were removed than that he went out there and lugged them around." I mean, those things are heavy. It's just highly unlikely that he would go tramp around and scatter them over the road.

In other words, Baldwin eventually comes down on the side of ON, then OFF, but isn't entirely convinced.

Two sets of esteemed curators. Two sets of diametrically opposite conclusions. I decided to look for a tiebreaker—a fifth arbiter, Richard Pare. Pare, the author of a monograph on Fenton, has written eloquently on why these photographs are important:

One of the undisputed masterpieces of photography is the Valley of the Shadow of Death, so potent was it already as a symbol of the war that the location is indicated on the printed key. Here he increases still further the divorcement of the subject from any specific identification with place. He had wanted to make an altogether different picture facing towards Sebastopol and full of specific and identifiable markers. Instead he was compelled by immediate danger to retreat a little way back up the track and in so doing was presented with the picture that he chose to record. It is devoid of any topographical detail that defines a particular place; it becomes instead an image about the horror of all war and the mundane business of destruction. It suggests only the potential for sudden and indiscriminate death. Fenton made two versions of the image and by imposing the one on the other it is possible to see that the second and published version is in all likelihood an arranged image. It makes the message of the image more emphatic and is a photographic solution that was unique. It
has no precedent and no successors; it is a stark description of a dreadful subject. The first iconic photograph of war.

Despite his published opinion, Pare describes himself as a flip-flopper on this very question. Some days he looks at the photographs and thinks it’s OFF followed by ON; on others, ON followed by OFF. Far from breaking the tie between the OFF-then-ONers (Keller and Haworth-Booth) and the ON-then-OFFers (Daniel and Baldwin), he further underlines the problem of using “logic” or “psychology” to adjudicate the issue.

**RICHARD PARE:** I go back and forth. Probably Fenton went out there or Sparling, his assistant, went out there and arranged the cannonballs, but then I look at it again and there just doesn’t seem to be a logic for that conclusion. If you compare, by flipping back and forth between the two frames on the computer, you can see where the cannonballs go missing from, and it doesn’t necessarily seem to follow what you would do if you were going to embark upon an enterprise of that kind. So there’s another possibility. There was a salvaging party, down there at the same time, gathering them up, but he doesn’t say in the letters that he wrote to his wife that there was anything like that going on. In other accounts of the war there are the most explicit descriptions of the ground being literally littered with cannonballs to the point where the horses had trouble picking their way between them. So it’s not in any way an extreme situation that he’s laying out, even if he is arranging them.

**ERROL MORRIS:** The oddity, of course, is that there’re two photographs.

**RICHARD PARE:** Right. You know, of course, that they are not the pictures he was intending to make, right? It’s not even the picture that he intended to make originally. He’d been out scouting, some days before, and had intended to make a picture further down the valley or the gully—it’s not so much a valley—towards Sebastopol and was driven back because there was too much fire coming in. Probably the pictures he was intending to make would have been far more site-specific. There would have been identifiable topographical features that people would recognize.

As Gordon Baldwin points out, Fenton had gone to the Valley of the Shadow of Death at least once before. Fenton mentions this in a letter dated April 4-5, 1855:

We walked along a kind of common for half a mile coming towards the end upon Russian cannon balls scattered about. Further on the balls lay

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Believing Is Seeing

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thicker, but in coming to a ravine called the valley of death the sight passed all imagination... round shot & shell lay in a stream at the bottom of the hollow all the way down you could not walk without treading upon them... following the curve of the ravine towards the town we came to a cavern in which some soldiers were stationed as a picket. They had made a garden in front forming the borders of the beds with cannon balls. We had gone a little further down & were admiring the rugged outline of the rock & pondering out where the face had been smashed by the Russians fire when we were startled by a great crack in the rock in front of us & a cloud of dust followed by a second knock upon the opposite face of the ravine as the ball bounded across it & then a heap of stones & the ball rolled away together down the ravine....

But what does this tell us?

"The sight passed all imagination... you could not walk without treading on them." There were cannonballs everywhere. Could it be—having seen the road on April 4 when the Russian cannonballs were "scattered about"—that Fenton sought to re-create on April 23 what he had seen earlier? Is ON merely a reenactment of a previously seen event? Did he arrive at the Valley of the Shadow of Death on April 23 only to be disappointed to see fewer cannonballs on the road than he had seen earlier, then scatter the balls to evoke what he had seen previously?

Again, these questions are not answered by Fenton's letters.

The recycling issue is also of interest, but it cannot resolve the question of which came first—ON or OFF. British soldiers could have collected the balls on the hill-sides and left them to be picked up on the road. In this scenario, Fenton takes the first picture (OFF) before the British soldiers pick up the balls, and then takes the second picture after the balls have been piled on the road (ON). In this scenario, OFF comes first, then ON. On the other hand, Fenton could have come on the cannonballs collected on the road, taken the first picture (ON), watched as British soldiers piled them on horse-drawn carts, waited for the carts to leave, and then taken the second picture (OFF). In this other scenario, ON comes first, then OFF. But in both scenarios Fenton has not intervened, and by Sontag's criteria, neither image would be posed.

And so the possibility of recycling does not help. It can support either conclusion—ON before OFF or OFF before ON. Recycling may be a good thing—even when it involves cannonballs—but it can't help us determine the order of the photographs.

So why are these respected curators proposing such a theory? One simple reason is that it preserves Fenton's reputation: he is still a brilliant photographer who has not posed anything. Recycling does speak to the question of Fenton's intentions. If someone else scattered the balls or picked them up, it's not Fenton's doing. It is not his attempt to make a better picture or to convey to some prospective viewer that he is in a very dangerous situation. But why this obsession with Fenton's character? Both Baldwin and Daniel imagine ON comes before OFF, and they invent an
underlying set of circumstances that adopts the recycling theory to preserve their favorable view of Fenton's character, just as Keller invents an underlying set of circumstances that preserves his unfavorable view of Fenton's character.

Much of the problem comes from our collective need to endow photographs with intentions. The minute we start to conjecture about Fenton's reasons, his intent—his psychological state—we are walking on unhallowed ground. Can we read Fenton's intentions from a photographic plate? Is there anything in the letters that tells us what he was really thinking and what really happened? We may project on to these photographs (or any photograph) the photographer's imagined intentions, but why is this anything other than a speculative exercise?

This led me to a more general question: would it be possible to order these photographs based on evidence in the photographs themselves? This idea appealed to me because it did not require me to imagine something about Fenton's intentions, that is, about his internal mental state. After all, how can I know what the guy sitting next to me in Starbucks is thinking, let alone a man who lived 150 years ago? I wanted to leave Fenton out of it. Was there a way to order the photographs based on the photographs alone?

I suspected that lighting and shadows might provide clues as to the time of day, and thus the order, if we could determine where the sun was in the sky. Following this line of inquiry, my first question was: which direction was Fenton facing—north, south, east, or west? Was he looking in the direction of where the cannonballs were coming from or in the opposite direction? The photograph looks as though the camera is pointed up into the hills rather than down into the valley; in other words, south rather than north.

Keller makes this point in *The Ultimate Spectacle*:

Fenton made two decisions reflecting his reluctance to expose himself to risks. First of all, of the two similarly shaped valleys, he chose the less dangerous one in the back of Chapman's Batteries. Secondly, he stopped in the upper, shallow part of the ravine, not in the deeper, more advanced part shown in the "best general views." Here, he decided to turn the camera back up towards the camps, rather than downward in the direction of Sebastopol, as Simpson and Robertson had done.

Fenton “decided to turn the camera back up towards the camps,” that is, the pictures were taken looking south. Pare came to the same conclusion. He is also convinced that Fenton “turned around and, literally facing in the opposite direction, looking uphill back towards the Allies encampment . . . was confronted by the picture.” But where is the evidence?

Keller has never gone to the Crimea. Pare has gone but was unable to find the Valley of the Shadow of Death.
Both Keller and Pare believe that Fenton was facing south—back toward the British encampments. Could they be mistaken? How did they determine this? Neither of them had stood where Fenton stood, looked through a camera lens and tried to match the contemporary landscape with the images that Fenton had taken 150 years before.

It was at this point that I resolved to go to the Crimea to find the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

Part 2

It was a historic occasion when I arrived in the Crimea with my cameraman, Bob Chappell, and his first assistant, Eric Zimmerman—it was within a few days of the 150th anniversary of the fall of Sebastopol on September 8, 1855, a date that marks the end of the Crimean War.

The airport at Simferopol—the Crimea’s capital—was clotted with dozens of elderly British tourists who arrived on the afternoon flight from Istanbul. For a brief moment I had a fantasy that I would make a movie about people at the end of their lives reaching back into some unknowable past, trying to recover something perhaps unknowable about their own past. I would follow them about, record their attempts to reconnect with history.

Because of the anniversary, it was difficult to locate an available guide, but eventually we found Olga Makarova—the guide of guides—often disgruntled but extremely knowledgeable. When I told her about the Valley of the Shadow of Death, she assumed that I wanted to go to the Valley of Death, as named by Tennyson in his poem “The Charge of the Light Brigade.” Susan Sontag herself points out the difference—to disabuse us, her readers, of the possibility of such confusion. She even suggests that Fenton might have deliberately fostered such a confusion. She writes: “... in the first version of the celebrated photo he was to call ‘The Valley of the Shadow of Death’ (despite the title, it was not across this landscape that the Light Brigade made its doomed charge).” Tennyson, in his poem “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” writes about “the valley of death,” not “the valley of the shadow of death”:

Half a league, half a league,
Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred:
"Forward, the Light Brigade!
Charge for the guns!" he said:
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

Which Came First, the Chicken or the Egg?

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Even before going to the Crimea, I had assembled an impressive collection of maps of the area. You can see that the Valley of the Shadow of Death is clearly marked on the period maps. And you can see why the valley was given that name. It is at the confluence of cannonball trajectories from three major Russian artillery batteries: the Flagstaff, Barracks, and Garden batteries.
Olga led us first to the Woronzoff Ravine, but I was adamant. “No, no! This is the Woronzoff Ravine,” I told her. “This is not the Valley of the Shadow of Death.” This was an error that I myself made when I first started looking at maps of the area. Present-day maps do not include the Valley of the Shadow of Death, but it is clearly marked on many period maps, and it is mentioned in many written accounts. (Of course, the name does not appear on French or Russian maps. It was a name given to a specific valley by British forces that occupied that area of the conflict.)
There is always difficulty when you try to tell local guides their business, but we retraced our steps back to Sebastopol and took a different road, which took us up to a ridge to the west of the Woronzoff Ravine. At last we were able to look down into the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

Miraculously, the area is still undeveloped. You can still see the remnants of trenches on the hill facing the Great Redan, and the old Chapman batteries. The cannonballs are gone, but the ground is littered with very tiny snail shells on what is called Shell Hill in many accounts from the Crimean War. The snails, oddly enough, made me feel connected to history.

We parked off to the side and then descended into the valley, down to a road at the bottom—the same road that can be seen in the Fenton photographs. Olga had shoes with high heels. Not stilettos, but heels high enough to make walking difficult.

Illustration #12
Olga's Shoes

The apex of her career had been shepherding the Duke of Edinburgh around Sebastopol for the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the World War II liberation of the Crimea by the Russian forces from German occupation. We were a few rungs down from her most illustrious customers, and we were, according to her, "breaking the rules." The usual tour includes the site of the charge of the Light Brigade, the monuments to the British and Russian war dead, a visit to Balaclava Harbor and the anorama, an extraordinary 360-degree tableau of the siege of Sebastopol. We were definitely off the beaten track and wandering around in the middle of nowhere.

We continued south along the road, checking the overgrown views against copies of the Fenton photographs. Soon we came to a fork—possibly the same fork seen on the horizon in the 1855 photographs. After a certain amount of rummaging around, walking back and forth over a smaller and smaller patch of terrain, a couple of false arms and a faulty calculation, we found the actual place where Fenton's two photographs were taken.

Believing Is Seeing
Here are two pictures taken with the same frame, from the same camera position—not unlike Fenton's pair of photographs. In the first photograph, the lens is partially covered by Fenton's 1855 photograph (OFF). In the second photograph, OFF has been taken away, revealing the “identical” landscape behind it—though it is not quite identical because the photographs were taken 150 years apart. The frame enlargements are from motion picture film shot by Bob Chappell.

There is no other point on the road where the landscape looks so similar to the landscape in the Fenton photographs. In this one spot, there was a match. Looking
south, away from Sebastopol, the landscape flattens out toward the high plains of the British encampments. Looking north, we see the hills just before Sebastopol.

There is no way of telling for sure from Fenton's photographs which direction he was facing. Both Ulrich Keller and Richard Pare believed that Fenton was looking south, and I can easily understand their mistake. Looking at the photographs, it looks as though we are looking back into the hills, but appearances are often deceiving and so are photographs. When one is standing in the landscape, it is evident Fenton was looking north. Or, more specifically, north-northwest. 9

Fenton's April 24 letter tells us that the photographs were taken in the afternoon but gives us little information about the direction his camera was pointing. At least the trip to the Crimea had provided this empirical data. Now we knew both camera direction and time of day. This is more than idle information. Think about it for a moment. Depending on time or direction, the lighting gets reversed.

When I first saw the Fenton photographs the cannonballs looked back-lit. But they can't be—not if we are really looking north. In the Northern Hemisphere the light comes from the south. The balls are, in fact, front-lit. Had I assumed that the cannonballs were back-lit because they looked back-lit? Had I allowed my beliefs to determine what I saw? Had I, too, fallen victim to the principle, believing is seeing?

My hunch was that the lighting and shadows on the cannonballs might be the key to ordering them. I wanted to experiment with lighting the cannonballs from various directions, replicating the direction of the sun and time of day. But first I needed an 1850s cannonball.

I am pretty certain the Duke of Edinburgh never asked Olga to go to the Panorama Museum to borrow a Crimean War cannonball. But to her credit, she took us there anyway.

An old Soviet-style guard ushered us into what looked like the parlor of a mental institution. The museum is an extraordinary place with a rotunda that houses
a 360-degree painted panorama. It was not long after the war that panoramas of
the siege were constructed—first in Paris, later in Sebastopol. Panoramas were
in vogue in those days. Installed in a special rotunda in 1905, marking the fiftieth
anniversary of the siege, it shows the Russians temporarily victorious before their
ultimate defeat by the allied forces (the French, the English, the Turks, and, believe
it or not, the Sardinians). The Panorama—a panorama of the destruction of war—
was destroyed by German bombing during World War II and then reconstructed in a
new rotunda building after the war.

ILLUSTRATION #16
INTERIOR OF THE PANORAMA MUSEUM

After some confusion, we were brought upstairs to meet the curator and some of
the staff. (I told them I’d won an Oscar.) After a desultory conversation—as desul-
tory as a conversation can be when none of the parties understand each other or
have a clear idea of what is going on—I asked for a cannonball. There were additional
translation difficulties. I remember Olga gesticulating wildly. But remarkably, they
agreed to our request. Successful, we returned to the Valley of the Shadow of Death
with a cannonball and took various pictures.

Which Came First, the Chicken or the Egg?
As the sun descended in the west, the sky became hazy and the shadow line on the cannonball less and less well defined, perhaps the first indication that an examination of the pattern of light and shadow on the cannonballs might be more difficult than I had imagined.

The day after our second excursion to the Valley of the Shadow of Death, we took a trip to the harbor at Balaclava and then to Yalta. Balaclava was a central supply point for the war effort in the Crimea. Eventually, a railroad was built from the harbor to the heights overlooking Sebastopol. Over a hundred years later, the Soviets had
hollowed out the entire mountain overlooking the entrance to the harbor and built a submarine base worthy of Dr. No. It was complete with concrete blast walls a hundred feet thick, an assembly room for thermonuclear weapons, dormitories where soldiers could live for months at a time, and a disguised entrance portal through which the submarines could secretly access the subterranean chambers. How was it possible that we could be walking in such a place? Only fifteen years earlier we would certainly have been killed as Western spies.

Yalta is a three-hour drive from Sebastopol along the southern coast of the Crimea. On our way there, Olga asked us to pull off the road. There was no turnout. No signs. Just a guardrail, shrub brush, and a steep hill looking down to the Black Sea. Olga pointed to something in the distance. You could just make out the orange roofs of a large building complex. It was Gorbachev’s summer home. It kind of looked like a metastatic International House of Pancakes. As Olga told us, “He came to this home as premier of the Soviet Union and left as nobody.”

Not far from Gorbachev’s complex is Khrushchev’s dacha, although it can’t be seen from the road. Olga, who considers herself a Russian, had a bone to pick with Khrushchev. Khrushchev, a Ukrainian, had given the Crimea to the Ukraine as a
birthday present to himself. When the Soviet Union broke up, the Crimea stayed with the Ukraine even though it had traditionally been part of Russia. Olga was not prepared to forgive him for this largesse—to himself and to the Ukraine—at the expense of the Russian Federation.

Khrushchev's dacha was built at the closest point across the Black Sea from Turkey. I remember reading that Khrushchev would sit on the deck of his dacha and look out across the water. I imagine his pawlike hand holding an exquisite crystal glass of vodka. At times, he thinks that he can see Turkey—a physical impossibility because of the curvature of the Earth. Not just Turkey, but Kennedy's damn Jupiter missiles in Turkey aimed at the Soviet Union and at his dacha. That was when he decided on a tit-for-tat policy: if Kennedy could put his missiles in Turkey a couple of hundred miles from the Soviet Union—a couple of hundred miles from Khrushchev's dacha—then Khrushchev could (with impunity) put his missiles in Cuba. The die was cast.

I also remember reading an account of October 28, 1962—the last night of the Cuban missile crisis, when many knowledgeable people thought the world would end. Khrushchev had not yet capitulated and Kennedy was poised for nuclear war. Khrushchev was in Moscow, Kennedy in Washington. We know what Khrushchev was doing from the accounts written by his son, Sergei. Khrushchev was so worried about the possibility of nuclear war that he spent a sleepless night and then announced his decision to remove the missiles from Cuba over Radio Moscow the following morning so that it could be broadcast to the entire world without delay. On the same night, Kennedy was down by the White House pool with his aide, Dave Powers, and two girlfriends watching Audrey Hepburn in Roman Holiday. What a story. Hepburn, heir to some unspecified throne, dreams of being free of the obligations of state, but in the end knows that she must return to the requirements of the monarchy. That die, too, was cast. It was a fantasy within a fantasy within the reality of the White House.

War is such a peculiar thing—inaugurated by the whims of few, affecting the fate of many. It is a difficult, if not impossible, thing to understand, yet we feel compelled to describe it as though it has meaning—even virtue. It starts for reasons often hopelessly obscure, meanders on, then stops.

On my return from the Crimea, I spoke to Richard Pare in more detail about the Crimean War and Fenton's images.

**RICHARD PARE:** Fenton always had a taste for the abstract and the geometrically formal in image making. There's this strange collapsing of perspective that he gets because of the footpath that's trodden into the left-hand side
of the road that connects up in the further distance to the main track as it disappears over the horizon. They have a parallel width that causes the thing to flip-flop in a way, visually condenses it into a kind of uneasy restlessness. He was very satisfied with the two pictures he made—in getting two negatives—and left it at that. The way it fits into the whole of his output is interesting. I don't know how familiar you are with the whole body of work. It's largely given over to portraits of the major senior officers, camp activities, and landscapes. Portraits of Lord Raglan, the commander in chief, and Omar Pasha, in charge of the Turkish troops, Péliissier, in charge of the French, and senior generals. Do you know about the history of the Crimean War?

In my obsessive discussion of these two pictures, had I forgotten that Roger Fenton was one of the first photographers to chronicle war—and a truly terrible war at that? Had I forgotten about the war while drifting into the war photograph? I hope not. Photographs provide an alternative way of looking into history. Not into general history—but into a specific moment, a specific place. It is as if we have reached into the past and created a tiny peephole.

**RICHARD PARE:** It's 1854 and Napoleon III wheels out an old treaty from 1740 to insist upon the right of the French to defend foreigners and people visiting from other nations into the Holy Land—which was then part of the Ottoman Empire. The original pretext was monks quarreling—Catholic and Russian Orthodox monks fighting it out in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. They got in a fight and some of them were killed over who should have the right to put a star up over the manger.¹⁰

Napoleon III has just got onto the throne after a coup d'état in 1852. But he has been effectively snubbed by the tsar, who looked down at him as a kind of arriviste upstart and used the squabble as an excuse to march down towards the Holy Land. Immediately the French established an alliance with the British, quite an extraordinary thing in itself. It's only thirty years after Waterloo.

The British and French were both working at the extreme limits of their supply lines. The winter of 1854–1855 was absolutely ghastly. When they arrived in September, they had perfect fall weather, wildflowers blooming in all directions. It was like heaven on Earth. By January they were in the most desperate situation, in complete misery. There was a freak windstorm, a hurricane that blew all the tents away, so nobody had any shelter at all. Officers, men, it didn't make any difference. Cholera was rampant. Dysentery. Casualties grew. Two-thirds were killed by disease and sickness rather than actual battle wounds.
Fenton arrives when things are beginning to improve a bit after a huge uproar in England. The government has fallen over the miscarriage of what was going on, having started out with almost complete support from pretty much everybody. A brilliant and controversial contrarian called John Bright—who was one of the great civil libertarians of the age—stood up in Parliament and gave impassioned speeches about the angel of death being brought to the land. Fenton arrives after all this, looking at these men who've seen hell very close up, and it shows in their faces. So he was trying to, somehow or other, with the very difficult mechanics of working at the time, to encapsulate some of that, and gets it, finally, in that one photograph.

There is also an extraordinary photographic panorama in eleven parts that he did of the whole plateau of Sebastopol. It starts off with the camp on the left, troops marshaling, armaments stacked in pyramidal forms, ditches being dug, tents, clothes being aired, all kinds of activity going on. You can see stretcher parties ready to go and people gazing out toward Sebastopol with bombardment going on as a daily occurrence, then it goes to the wasteland in the middle, which is, literally, the killing field where people died by the thousands, and finishes up with the graves of the senior officers on the far right hand side. So it operates as a kind of background to the other single image—the Valley of the Shadow of Death—which is without question the greater picture. But that single image gains in resonance by comparison with the panorama.

ILLUSTRATION #20
PANORAMA
(following spread)

It is of course impossible to capture the horror of war in a single image or single letter. The British artillery had assembled on the hills overlooking Sebastopol, the lines split into two parts, bisected by the Woronzoff Road, the Chapman batteries on the left (facing Sebastopol) and the Gordon batteries on the right. A railway had been built from the port at Balaclava to the British encampments on the heights above Sebastopol. The French and British had positioned approximately five hundred large guns close to the Russian fortifications. Artillery shells of every size and description had been stockpiled. And then the barrage began. Fenton's letter of April 4–5, which refers to the "valley of death," was written on a Wednesday or Thursday. The second bombardment started several days later.

There has been very heavy firing today, but the promised opening of all the batteries did not take place. It is now said to be adjourned until the question of peace or war is finally settled... up to the present time the Russians
have decidedly the best of it ... that is the siege though ... whenever they attack they loose [sic] heaps of men but they keep advancing their works & getting fresh batteries made & new rifle pits. . . . The rumour today is that the firing is to begin on Monday & continue 5 days when the troops are all to go in.

The “firing” actually began (as Fenton had predicted) on Easter Monday, April 9, 1855, and continued for ten days. I have read estimates that 6,000 Russians were killed, and 1,600 allies. The following letter is from a young captain to his wife. It attracted my attention because it was written on April 20, a couple of days after the bombardment ended and three days before Fenton took his two photographs. It captures the desperation that many British soldiers felt after the second bombardment. The shelling, designed to put an end to the war, ushered in just another period of indecision, confusion, and violence.

Our siege must be numbered among the things that have been. It is over & has been a more ridiculous & disgusting farce than the first. The Russian batteries & works are as good & strong as ever & further than the mischief that such a fire must have caused in the town [Sebastopol], we are no nearer our end than we were months ago. There is one universal feeling of disgust and humiliation among us at this second ridiculous exhibition. . . . We are now, as we have been for months, ourselves the besieged in our corner of the Crimea. We have a most splendid army thrown away on our chiefs, either by their dissensions or their incompetency. . . . An absurd "Reconnaissance" took place the day before yesterday in which the Turks and our Cavalry took part. They solemnly went out & killed one Cossack & took another and our loss consisted in the capture by the enemy of two Navies who went out to see the fun! Our only other attempt at offensive operation consisted of an attack on some ambuscades that annoy our Batteries on the right. It was conducted as all our operations seem to be. A body of the 77th went out last night, drove the Russians out of their holes & were left totally unsupported to hold their places against whole columns of the Russes. They were of course cut to pieces but fought splendidly & held their ground in one of the ambuscades. They lost their Colonel, Egerton, a very fine fellow, and a Captain, a little boy named Lempriere, who had just got his company, about 20!, killed, & two officers wounded. All of this is very sad & has caused great feelings of disgust among us; men's lives, if one may use the term, being frittered away, in wretched little mismanaged attacks of this sort that do nobody any good & that are only redeemed from being ridiculous by the gallantry our poor soldiers always show.
For me, the Crimean War is the “perfect war.” It was started for obscure reasons, was hopelessly murderous, and accomplished nothing. Even the charge of the Light Brigade was a senseless exercise. (If you believe Cecil Woodham-Smith's account in The Reason Why—one of the truly great books about war—the charge may have occurred because of a missing comma in Lord Raglan's orders to Lord Lucan.)

The Crimean War is often described as a harbinger of the American Civil War, but it is more akin to World War I—a stationary front informed by endless and futile exchanges of lethal artillery fire. Trench warfare par excellence. Lord Raglan, the commander of the British forces, previously the Duke of Wellington's aide-de-camp, lost his arm to a French cannonball at Waterloo. His specially designed sleeve—the Raglan sleeve, along with the cardigan and the balaclava—is now mainly how we remember the Crimean War. A war defined by innovations in wardrobe—a sleeve, a sweater, and a hat. Raglan, who died in the Crimea just before the fall of Sebastopol, often seemed confused about what was going on. He would exhort his soldiers to go out and fight the French and had to be reminded that, in this particular war, the Russians were the enemy. The French were his allies.

There is an extraordinary passage in A. W. Kinglake's eight-volume history of the Crimean War, The Invasion of the Crimea: Its Origins and an Account of Its Progress down to the Death of Lord Raglan. The passage concerns the April 1855 bombardment and makes liberal use of what is known as the “pathetic fallacy.” The term, coined by John Ruskin in 1856, refers to our propensity to endow inanimate nature with humanlike characteristics. Ruskin clearly disapproved of this tendency—he called it a fallacy, after all. But to navigate in the world—to read the world, so to speak—we need to see the world as having some sort of purpose, some sort of motivation. (It is too frightening otherwise.) Hence, we see intentionality everywhere. The hurricane wants to thwart our plans; the earthquake intends to teach us a lesson.

Here is the passage from Kinglake in its entirety. It is possibly the masterpiece of the pathetic fallacy.

### The Ways of a Cannonball When Obstructed Without Being Stopped

Whether taking its flight through the air, or encountering more solid obstacles; a round-shot of course must be always obeying strict, natural laws, and must work out the intricate reckoning enjoined by conflict of power with absolute, servile exactness; but between the “composition” of “forces” maintained in our physical world and the fixed resolve of a mind made up under warring motives there is always analogy, with even sometimes strange resemblance; and to untutored hearers a formula set down in algebra would convey less idea of the path of a hindered, though not vanquished cannonball than would the simple speech of a savage who, after tracing its course (as only savages can), has called it a demon let loose. For not only does it seem to be armed with a mighty will, but somehow to govern its action with
ever-ready intelligence, and even to have a "policy." The demon is cruel and firm; not blindly, not stupidly obstinate. He is not a straightforward enemy. Against things that are hard and directly confronting him he indeed frankly tries his strength, and does his utmost to shatter them, and send them in splinters and fragments to widen the havoc he brings; but with obstacles that are smooth and face him obliquely he always compounds, being ready on even slight challenge to come, as men say, to "fair terms" by varying his line of advance, and even if need be, resorting to crooked, to sinuous paths. By dint of simple friction with metal, with earth, with even the soft, yielding air, he adds varied rotary movements to those fell skill as he goes; he acquires a strange nimbleness, can do more than simply strike, can wrench, can lift, can toss, can almost grasp; can gather from each conquered hindrance a new and baneful power; can be rushing for instance straight on in a horizontal direction, and then—because of some contact—spring up all at once like a tiger intent on the throat of a camel.

"The demon is cruel and firm," "he acquires a strange nimbleness . . . a new and baneful power," "a tiger intent on the throat of a camel." The soulless, inanimate world of the iron cannonball comes alive, literally with a vengeance. Not only does the cannonball have intent—it plans, it connives, it is hopelessly devious, maybe even deviant.

Photographs work the same way. They are nothing more than silver crystals arranged on paper or, in the case of digital photography, nothing more than a concatenation of 1s and 0s resident on a hard drive. Yet, when it's a portrait, a person looking back out at us from a photograph, we could believe that the photograph has captured something of the sitter's essence—something of the stuff that is in his head.

I, too, look at the two Fenton photographs and try to imagine what Fenton's intentions might have been. It's unavoidable. People have been programmed to do so by natural selection—to project ourselves into the world—and to imagine Fenton's world as we imagine ours. We want to know where we end and the world begins. We want to know where that line is. It's the deepest problem of epistemology.

All of the central issues of photography that I address in this book of essays—questions of posing, photo fakery, reading the intention of the photographer from the image itself, questions about what a photograph means and how it relates to the world it photographs—are contained in these twin Fenton photographs. The good Fenton photograph, honest and unadorned by a desire for contrivance or misdirection, and the bad Fenton photograph—the photograph decried by Sontag—corrupted by the sleight of hand, the trick, the calculated deception.

But the question remains—which is which?

One last thought: I have often imagined a counterpart to Fenton—someone on the Russian lines who also experienced the terrible shelling during April 1855. And
then I found him—a young artillery officer who despaired of ever having a military career. He said, "I may never be a general of the army, but perhaps I can become a general of literature." In his *Sebastopol Sketches*, written June 26, 1855, sixty days or so after Fenton's letter to his wife, he says:

Now I have said all I wish to say on this occasion. I am, however, beset by a painful thought. Perhaps I ought not to have said it. Perhaps what I have said belongs to the category of those harmful truths each of us carries around in his subconscious, truths we must not utter aloud lest they cause active damage. . . . Where in this narrative is there any illustration of evil that is to be avoided? Where is there any illustration of good that is to be emulated? Who is the villain of the piece? And who its hero? All the characters are equally blameless and equally wicked. . . . No, the hero of my story, whom I love with all my heart and soul, whom I have attempted to portray in all his beauty and who has always been, is now and will always be supremely magnificent, is truth.

There is no evidence to support this, but I imagine one of the flaming hot cannonballs careening from wall to rocky wall in the Valley of the Shadow of Death—perhaps landing at Fenton's feet—bearing the invisible fingerprints of Leo Tolstoy.

Part 3

"Too bad, it was a cloudy day," I lamented to my friend, the inventor Dennis Purcell. "You really can't see any shadows."

Dennis corrected me: "I don't think it was cloudy. It was a bright, sunny day. Or perhaps cloudy-bright." We were looking at the two Fenton photographs on our respective computers.

Dennis explained that most nineteenth-century photographic emulsions are blue-sensitive and hence cannot record the sky—overcast, partially cloudy, and sunny skies are all overexposed. The sky is a featureless white, but the "whiteness" of the sky is unrelated to the question of whether there are clouds or whether you can see shadows. It was only much later that panchromatic film—film that was less blue-sensitive—was developed.

Dennis was right. In both ON and OFF the sky looks overcast but you can see shadows. You have to look at the shadows: from them it may be possible to calculate the height of the sun in the sky. In "Valley of the Shadow of Death" the shadows are produced by cannonballs. In other photographs shadows may be produced by trees, various man-made objects, or people standing in the frame.
Long before I journeyed to the Crimea, I had been shown an extraordinary book written by Billy Klüver, *A Day with Picasso*. A Berkeley-trained engineer, Klüver had collaborated with a number of artists, including John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol. He had also, over a period of some twenty years, assembled a collection of early-twentieth-century photographs of Picasso, Modigliani, and Moïse Kisling, but it was not until fairly late in the game that Klüver surmised that the photographs were taken with one camera on four rolls of film—twenty-four pictures, six pictures on a roll—and that they were taken over a very short period, possibly a single day.

As Klüver writes,

> When I came across the tenth photograph (No. 24 in the sequence in which they were taken) reproduced in the catalogue of the Modigliani exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in spring of 1981, with its very distinct shadows on the buildings in the background, it occurred to me that if the buildings could be identified, it might be possible to use the shadows to determine the exact day and time the photographs were taken.
The first step for Klüver was to determine the angle of the sun. He employed various "markers": the awning of the Café de la Rotonde, the foliage on trees, Kisling’s dog, Kouski; the dress worn by Picasso’s mistress, Paquerette. Using these, he was able to order the twenty-four photographs, to determine that the photographs were taken on August 12, 1916, and to identify the photographer: Jean Cocteau.
ILLUSTRATION #24
THE INTERSECTION OF RASPAIL AND MONTPARNASSE

The intersection of Boulevard Raspail and Boulevard du Montparnasse, where most of the photographing took place. The cross marks with identifying capital letters indicate where Cocteau was standing to take the photograph, and the arrows indicate the direction he was pointing the camera. The circles with the dot represent gas lights. Boulevard du Montparnasse is oriented 26.7 degrees from west to north.

ILLUSTRATION #25
NO. 7 POSITION C

No. 7 Position C. 2:15. The rays of the sun have just passed being perpendicular to the building along Boulevard du Montparnasse, which on this date occurred at 2 o'clock. The five-degree shadow cast on the building above Max Jacob's hat sets the time at around 2:15. Max Jacob is standing on the traffic island between the tramway tracks going along Boulevard Raspail and those going along Boulevard du Montparnasse. To the right of his shoulder is the entrance to Hazard.

Ozon and Picasso, with his unseen pants legs, look as if they are waiting for the Gare Montparnasse-Bastille tram to pass. Right in front of them on the other side of the boulevard is the flower stand. This is the first photograph on Cocteau's second roll of film.

Printed from Cocteau Archive negative.

Which Came First, the Chicken or the Egg?

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Unfortunately, the Fenton photographs offer few opportunities for this sort of forensic examination. The lack of features that makes these photographs a powerful metaphor for the desolation of war also makes them a difficult source of information about shadows and sun angle. Where Klüver had buildings, light posts, and various people to cast different sorts of shadows at different times of day, as well as the correspondence of many of the people in the photographs, I had a couple of letters and an almost featureless landscape. It was a kind of existentialist’s dream. Something like a surrealist painting without the driftwood.

The cannonballs become the first and only place to look for shadows. Nothing else in the picture casts one. There are no trees, no landmarks of any kind, save for the dirt road and footpath that bisect the frame and disappear into the distance. There is also nothing to tell us about the sky—it is washed out, featureless, and dirty white. Did a cloud pass across the sun, changing well-defined shadows to diffuse, murky lines? Was there bright sunlight? The sky—or lack of sky—is compatible with both.

I thought the sun position and shadows could be used to calculate the time of each of the photographs and lead to a solution of the ON-OFF problem. I constructed a sun map for Sebastopol, April 1855, based on software routinely used by gaffers (lighting technicians) in the motion picture business. I set the latitude (44°37’ N)
and longitude (33°31' E) for Sebastopol and the date, April 23, 1855. (The software only goes back a hundred years or so, but mercifully, April 23, 1855, is much the same as April 23, 1955—at least as far as sun angle in Sebastopol is concerned.)

On April 23, 1855, the sun rose around 6:00 a.m. and set a little before 8:00 p.m. The chart also tells us that the sun reached its zenith around 1:00 p.m. and was 60 degrees above the horizon from the south. The sun at around 4:00 p.m. was about 40 degrees above the horizon.

The sun map, of course, can take us just so far. We have to know several additional things. Were the photographs taken in the morning or the afternoon? Which direction was the camera facing—east, west, north, or south? Happily, my trip to the Crimea had resolved any disagreements about the direction Fenton was facing when he took the picture. I had discovered that Fenton was facing north, toward the shelling—toward Sebastopol. Isn’t this the first law of artillery, after all? Face the direction the fire is coming from—that way you don’t get hit in the back with a cannonball.

And from the April 24, 1855, letter that he wrote his wife we know that Fenton took the photographs between 3:00 p.m. and 5:00 p.m. Using the time of day and camera direction with the sun diagram, I would expect the cannonballs to be lit from the south; that is, they would be front-lit. And as the afternoon wore on, they would become side-lit. The cannonballs would be side-lit from right to left in the photos as the sun moved from east to west.
But there was an additional worry. Were the shadows distinct enough to see a clear difference between the two photos? The sun map showed that if the photographs were taken about an hour apart, then the sun moved not much more than a 10-degree arc—up and down or left to right. Ten degrees is not that much. Could it be accurately measured in the photographs—that subtle shifting of shadows from right to left or up and down? And how long did it take Fenton to take the two photographs? An hour? More than an hour? Or perhaps much less time elapsed. Furthermore, as I learned on my trip, as it became more and more hazy toward sundown, the shadows on my 24-pound cannonball became less and less distinct.

I have always prided myself that my work is, as I like to put it, a combination of the prurient and the pedantic. I was thoroughly convinced that the current endeavor was pedantic, but had I lost the prurient element?

I had entered the shadowland of the shadows. Before I had determined the direction of Fenton's camera, I had thought that the cannonballs in ON looked more top-lit than the cannonballs in OFF. But then when I determined that we were looking north or north-northwest, not south or south-southeast, the cannonballs looked different. I mean, they actually looked different. What was I measuring? The shift in the shadows could be very small, too small for accurate measurement. Furthermore, what did I know about interpreting shadows?

Type in "shadow master" or "shadow expert" on Google, and a number of bizarre references pop up. One of the first search results is Connie Zweig, author of *Romancing the Shadow: A Guide to Soul Work for a Vital, Authentic Life* (with Steve Wolf), "an in-depth look at our hidden, wounded selves and how they form in early childhood . . . often wrecking [sic] havoc on our lives." Ms. Zweig was followed by how-to books on eye shadow application, video games, and comic book heroes. Eventually, Ralph Bouwmeester, an engineer and sun and shadow specialist, popped up.

I got excited. The very idea of "a shadow expert" conjures something out of film noir. Armed with a set of sine and cosine tables, isn't it possible to undermine the world?

R. Bouwmeester & Associates
Sun & Shadow Position Specialists
with Modeling Applications in
Accident and Crime Scene Reconstruction,
Urban Development, Site Planning and Building Design

I sent Mr. Bouwmeester copies of ON and OFF, and not long afterward we got on the phone.

**RALPH BOUWMEESTER:** The bottom line is that the checks and balances seem to point in the same direction, and I am coming up with a couple of
decent times for the two pictures. Not only that, I’m sure you’re aware that there’s a stark difference in the objects that are visible in the two pictures.

ERROL MORRIS: Okay.

RALPH BOUWMEESTER: Balls that appear in [OFF] all of a sudden are gone in [ON], as if they have been picked up from the hill and moved over to the road. But the nature of the cannonballs on the road—just the way they look—appears to be different from the cannonballs on the hill in the foreground.

ERROL MORRIS: I’m not sure I understand.

RALPH BOUWMEESTER: I don’t know how you would ever doctor these. But if these were digital photos, I’d be inclined to say that it was a poor job of cutting and pasting. The perspective doesn’t seem to be 100 percent right from what I can see.

ERROL MORRIS: How so?

RALPH BOUWMEESTER: What I’m trying to say is there are cannonballs that seem to be exactly the same size, some are in the foreground and some are set back further down the road. When you measure them, they’re exactly the same size, which would happen if you were to clone them without resizing them. There are many little inconsistencies like this that make me uncomfortable.

Bouwmeester was not proposing uncertainty; he was suggesting some kind of chicanery. The cannonballs are all the same size? Because they have been cloned? Fenton with a cloning tool!? He seems to be confusing the technical possibilities of twenty-first-century digital photography with the process of manufacturing nineteenth-century wet-plate glass negatives and albumen prints. First of all, the cannonballs are not the same size. There are clumps of cannonballs in one foreground position that appear different in size. Second of all, don’t we have to know the focal length of the lens and the distance from the foreground to the background? That aside, how would cannonball size affect the measurement of sun angle, anyway? A spherical cannonball is a spherical cannonball is a spherical cannonball. Would it make any difference—for calculating sun angle—to know that one cannonball is a 24-pounder, another a 32-pounder?15

This raises a question that greatly interests me: why people accept claims of posing, fakery, and alteration rather than looking at the data. The data may be complex and hard to understand, but instead of trying to determine its meaning, people leap to a simplistic conclusion: the data is not real data. It has been doctored.

Isn’t Sontag’s theory something like that? She resolves a mystery simply by declaring it a trick, a plan to deceive. The claim that a photograph is posed is a claim that the photographer intended to deceive the viewer. It’s not that photographers never set out to fool or trick us, it’s just that trickery is often a too simple and convenient explanation.

Today, possibly because of Photoshop and other photography-doctoring software, people have become suspicious of photographs. This is a good thing. It’s better
to be on the tip of our toes about the possibility of error rather than oblivious to it. But not every photograph has been tampered with. Bouwmeester wasn’t analyzing shadows; he was looking for things hidden in the shadows.

We returned briefly to Bouwmeester’s original hunch: that the cannonballs had been removed from the hillside and placed on the road.

**ERROL MORRIS:** Have you done a count, by any chance?

**RALPH BOUWMEESTER:** I was thinking about it, but I thought the heck with that; I’m not going to count them.

My indefatigable researcher, Ann Petrone, pointed out that if the number of cannonballs was the same, then the recycling theory could be eliminated. If soldiers had come to collect cannonballs from the road after the first photograph had been taken, then there would be fewer total cannonballs in the second picture. But if Fenton had just moved the cannonballs around as props, then the total number of cannonballs would be the same in both photographs.

Dennis Purcell suggested that I talk to John and Chris Russ, the father-and-son creators of Fovea Pro—a forensic photography program for processing and measuring images.

John Russ was busy, but Chris had time to look at the photographs and do a forensic analysis.

**CHRIS RUSS:** And you know that Fenton was looking northward?

**ERROL MORRIS:** Yeah. North by northwest, like the movie.

**CHRIS RUSS:** Okay, knowing that you’re pointing north-northwest in the afternoon, shadows will be longer on the right side later.

**ERROL MORRIS:** Yes.

**CHRIS RUSS:** Well, I’m going to try to match the overall contrast between the two pictures if I can. The top layer of OFF is considerably brighter in places. So it’s got a much higher contrast. So I could try to flatten that and see what I can do. I’m going to have to balance these pictures to match each other. Let me play for a few minutes. I’ll be right back with you.

A couple of hours later . . .

**CHRIS RUSS:** I have balanced the two images out and I’ve got some observations. Now that I’ve balanced the contrast and dealt with a few interesting printing artifacts, the shadows of the balls are very, very hard to measure.
There are specular highlights in OFF, making me think there are no clouds at that point.

ERROL MORRIS: Specular highlights? What do you mean?

CHRIS RUSS: Okay, the difference between a bright metal surface and a polished plastic surface is the plastic seems flat and the metal has a bright spot on it relative to where the light source is. That bright light source is a specular highlight. That happens with material if you've got something that's polished versus something that isn't. It also happens with the same subject if you change the light from being a single point source, which you have on a sunny day, to a diffuse light source, which you have on a cloudy day. So one of the things that's causing problems for us is that one of these pictures was taken—and you can tell that by the contrast of the picture—one was taken with clouds and the other was taken with no clouds. So that's one of the things that's going on.

ERROL MORRIS: Uh-huh.

CHRIS RUSS: Considering that, I felt that because the balls were metal, they might not be as good a measure as the countryside itself. Therefore, it's important to know the angle of the hills on the sides of the road and the road itself. That's the part I started looking at. Because first I felt, "Oh well, let me compare the relative shadow from left to right on the two different sides of the road." When I first did that, I got the impression that ON happened earlier in the day than OFF, with the sun going farther over because the embankment on the right side got brighter. Now, this is all completely backwards if Fenton's pointing southward instead of northward. I'm looking at the valley as a sort of a bowl shape that is lit in different places depending on the time of day. You with me so far?

ERROL MORRIS: I think so.
CHRIS RUSS: And that's consistent with the other way of measuring where the sun is—looking at the balls (because they're spheres) and determining where the light is on them. In OFF the light is farther down toward the right. In ON the balls seems to be lit over pretty much the top half of the ball. Closer to the middle of the day. Assuming afternoon for both, and assuming a camera direction of north-northwest, then ON was taken first. I'll try to balance the gray scale between the images using the road itself. There is one other thing different between these two images that makes it so hard to tell anything from the lighting. In ON, there's a hill in the distance—just straight ahead—that is roughly the same intensity of the embankment on the right. In OFF, the hill's considerably brighter. And I'm trying to figure out what that means. Because we could be chasing our tails in a circular argument just because of what the clouds do.

ERROL MORRIS: Yes.

CHRIS RUSS: Now, the other observation I have is that the number of balls that seem to be missing from the left side and present on the road are not consistent. A lot more show up in the road than disappear from the side. And most of the ones in the major gully, which are where the vast majority of the balls are, don't change, although a couple have moved slightly.

ERROL MORRIS: Another odd thing, of course, is if you look, there's that dirt path that you see coming down on the left, and you'll notice again just to camera left of that path, there's a rock which is present in ON, but absent in OFF. I've named the rock "Esmeralda."

Enter Esmeralda.

CHRIS RUSS: Esmeralda? Why add a rock?

ERROL MORRIS: Or subtract a rock?

CHRIS RUSS: Yes, I saw that rock. I was using the rock that's farther up that path. It's present in both, a fairly large rock, given the distance, as my primary method of balancing brightness. Because I felt that the side to the camera of that rock was least likely to be affected by the lighting. But why would someone add the rock? You might argue that someone walked through there.
Which Came First, the Chicken or the Egg?
ERROL MORRIS: Someone had to have walked through there. Something happened between the two photographs. The cannonballs didn't just roll off or on to the road. Someone moved them.

All of a sudden there was an exclamation from Chris Russ. It was a eureka moment for him, but I was no longer sure what he was talking about. Had we both retreated into a pixel-based fantasyland?

CHRIS RUSS: Bingo! Bingo! You know that hill in the distance? Let's say we're close to sunset in the second shot. It would be lit up. Earlier in the day, it wouldn't be. Okay, there's this other hill, interestingly enough, over toward the left. Do you mind if I take the phone and beat it against my head for a couple of minutes?

ERROL MORRIS: Please don't injure yourself on my account over this.

CHRIS RUSS: Oh, don't worry. This is a very intriguing puzzle. One trick that's going to help you: after you scan the images at high resolution, change your Photoshop mode to 16 bits. That won't do anything right away, but then change the image size. And what that's going to do is: every new pixel is
going to be made up of original pixels from before and will produce much better averages and give you tonality. And then as you start stretching and compressing contrast, you might start to see something. I reduced my image size down to about 2,000 pixels wide from the 5,000 we attempted before, and it let me do some things. Got rid of some—some but not all—of the speckle. But it also let me see some definition, some tone on the back of rocks. A useful trick. I am hoping to find a footprint.

Find a footprint! Whose footprint? Fenton’s footprint? Or his assistant, Sparling’s? Or some nameless British soldier—the unknown soldier who unwittingly left his imprint on one of the iconic pictures of the Crimean War? A phantom? A clue? And just what was Chris’s eureka moment? Later, he told me what was going through his head. He went from (1) looking at the cannonballs as reflective spheres that should show the direction of the light; to (2) looking for some kind of addition to the scene that might indicate the passage of time, for example, a footprint; and then, finally, to (3) looking at the valley as a bowl in which he could study an overall change in the lighting. The eureka moment was, presumably, the moment he abandoned looking at lighting on the cannonballs and started looking at the overall pattern of the light on the landscape.

CHRIS RUSS: I’ve got a proposal for you. Let’s say the person on the hill was chucking balls down toward the gully from the left. Later, they walked down and picked some up and put them in the road. That would account for why a number of rocks have been moved toward the right.

ERROL MORRIS: The cannonballs could have been coming from camera right to left. Now, they could have overshot the road and then rolled down that hill—

CHRIS RUSS: But where did the balls come from? There are some that are in OFF that are not in ON, and vice versa.

ERROL MORRIS: This could lead to madness, no?

CHRIS RUSS: The cloud cover makes all the arguments about shadows ineffective. And then I’m finding a small number of objects, it’s not very many, that are present in OFF that are not present in ON. Some are balls, some are rocks. As opposed to a few cases where I found things that clearly had been moved. Same object, but its position has changed. It is completely consistent with the theory that this is staged. But there is no proof here that it is one or the other.

ERROL MORRIS: Staged in the sense that he put the cannonballs on the road?

CHRIS RUSS: That the balls were not present in the first photo, were added in the second.

ERROL MORRIS: So now you think that ON is the second photograph?

CHRIS RUSS: Yes. I think the balls are local and the balls were moved onto the road for contrast because there is a plethora of balls in OFF. The number
of new balls is not a very significant number compared to the number that are already there. So it's probably for purposes of making the picture—for aesthetic purposes. Not to say, hey, look how dangerous my life is. Because in both pictures, if you look at the number of balls in the gully, it outnumbers the ones on the road by a factor of five easily. So the number of balls that's different is a relatively small percentage, and I bet they came from the hill on the left. So I think this is more for the purposes of creating a pretty picture than for being boastful.

**ERROL MORRIS:** Clearly, you could make the argument that it makes the picture more graphic because you can see the cannonballs more clearly. The black balls are contrasted against the relatively light surface of the road.

**CHRIS RUSS:** Sure. He may have even waited for a cloud to block out the sun to get a better tonality, a better picture. If he's a photographer, he's going to do the best he can to control lighting. It's what I would do. He found his spot, and it was a matter of getting the light right and moving some of the balls so that the picture would be better. He was composing. The characterization of this as being a function of [lack of] bravado is probably overstated. He did make a very nice picture to present the story better, given the medium he had at the time—black-and-white, limited dynamic range of brightness and darkness. This gives it the kind of contrast that tells the story better, but I don't think it's not true. So I do think that he modified the scene, but I don't think he did it in a manner that's illegitimate.

Illegitimate? Are there really legitimate and illegitimate reasons for altering a scene? According to Russ, if Fenton changed the scene to improve it aesthetically, he did it with just cause. Have we been thrown back to the original question of Fenton's intentions? I feel the shadows growing longer.

**ERROL MORRIS:** So, ON is the second photograph?

**CHRIS RUSS:** The logic for removing them from the road—that would leave the others that are in the gully next to the road. If they were in that order, wouldn't it involve putting these ones that are on the road into the gully? I couldn't find a motive for that direction. If the balls in the road were removed, there are other things I would have expected to have moved, too. If someone was taking the balls to shoot them back, there are five times as many balls in the gully, why not take them from there, too? Conversely, if you're removing them from the road to be able to travel down the road, they'd probably end up in the gully or in the gully on the other side. That does not appear to have happened. Furthermore, if you were doing that, why wouldn't you put them over on the hill on the left side in a convenient declivity? It doesn't make sense.
ERROL MORRIS: Okay. But then your main reason for believing OFF comes before ON is based on the psychology of people, about why they do the things they do, about how they would act, do act, have acted—independent of the question of what we can learn from the photograph itself.

CHRIS RUSS: There are the things I can learn from the photograph itself. That there’s a difference between the pictures and their lighting that is consistent with the hour and a half that he’s talking about . . . if someone very kindly put in a true vertical pole and pointed the camera in a known direction. But if we’re sloping slightly downhill north by northwest, then the western sun is going to light up the ground. But then please explain to me why the ground is considerably darker in OFF than ON? The only thing that comes to mind is: because the light is more diffuse. So let’s look at OFF, which has relatively darker ground compared to the ruts in the road. How can we be pointing north-northwest and have dark ground? Could it be that we are in the shadow of the hill to the left?

ERROL MORRIS: So you’re saying that—

CHRIS RUSS: If we really were in the shadows, then we wouldn’t have highlights on the cannonballs. So the thought was to use a different surface that isn’t going to be in shadow, and there are two. There’s the hill in the far distance at the 1:00 position, and then there’s the nearer embankment on the right side of the road. Well, it’s brighter in OFF than in ON—which I suppose could mean the sun has dropped further. The hill in the distance does the same thing, but the hill is not a plane, it is a curved surface, and if they were an hour and a half apart and one was at 3:00 and one was at 4:30, the sun would have had to have been a lot farther down. It’s diffuse in ON, and therefore we can’t tell what the time is in that picture.

ERROL MORRIS: I’m not sure I understand.

CHRIS RUSS: I bet he waited until a cloud got in front of the sun, and then he took the picture. He first got a picture of the spot, and then he got the picture he wanted to print. The first picture was because he had a feeling that it was going to be a good picture, and he didn’t know if that was the only one he was going to get. And the second one is the one he wanted to publish.

He had a feeling? So much for forensic photography.

What started me on my pilgrimage to the Crimea were my suspicions about Sontag’s ability to order the photographs in a hierarchy of authenticity based on what she imagined were Fenton’s intentions. Now Chris Russ, a specialist in forensic photography, had also based his ordering of the photographs by imputing Fenton’s feelings. Russ differs from Sontag and Keller, however, in his interpretation of Fenton’s motives. The reason Russ believes ON came second is that ON is the aesthetically more pleasing image (to Russ) and thus must have been Fenton’s second effort at photographing the scene.

The conversation turned from the question of sequence to the issue of posing.
CHRIS RUSS: If a picture's taken in a studio, I think it's pretty much safe to say that it is posed. And photography that is done where the subject is not aware of your presence, an argument could be made that that is not. That's certainly true for people. Once you change the scene, you cease to simply be an observer. That's what a purist could say. Then the follow-up question would be: did he substantively change the scene?

ERROL MORRIS: But if you only had the photograph in front of you, how would you ever be able to even answer such a question?

CHRIS RUSS: Well, the whole point is, we can't. But if it were posed, I would say it's compositional. It's an aesthetic choice. The balls are readily available because they're there, and the contrast in the picture shows them very nicely on the road because the road appears quite bright. It looks like he was looking for the contrast, and that would also be consistent with picking a time of day for the photograph when the lighting is diffuse. If someone is arguing that he is going to great lengths to puff up his reputation, I would say: no, you're wrong. If someone is trying to be the purist and say that he modified the scene, I would probably agree but say: it was just for aesthetics; it certainly wasn't for any other purpose. Because putting cannonballs on the road does add to the aesthetics of the image. That seems to be the primary reason. He's a photographer—that's the way photographers think. Look at Fenton, look at Mathew Brady, fast-forward to Ansel Adams. They're developing a whole new art form, and we're learning about both what they themselves saw and how to present it. Ansel Adams was renowned for doing an immense amount of work in the dark room to show the kinds of things that he wanted because the process itself, particularly paper, was very limited in what kind of contrast it would show. So he did an awful lot to emphasize contrast in ink and to show detail. This I believe was Fenton's primary concern. Do I think that a number of things could be determined by just looking at a picture? Yes. But we need to know things about it to add information to the scene.

ERROL MORRIS: Are you saying: to interpret a picture we need more than the picture itself? We need context.

CHRIS RUSS: One of the things we do in image analysis is that we control the situation under which the image was taken so we can make these inferences. Even Ansel Adams did things in the darkroom. I don't know what the equivalents were in 1854. It would be very interesting to know what Fenton did. Clearly, changing the stage a little bit is well within the realm of possibility, and waiting for the right kind of lighting is in the realm. I've done shoots that are at sunrise or sunset [purposely] because of the color and the angle of the sun. I'm sure he was aware of it. If you go back to the 1700s, they were aware of it in their paintings. The problem with the scientific side of it is that the photographer was not a neutral observer. He picked the best picture he could find. That's the problem when you look at a picture in a scientific journal and underneath it there's a little caption that says,
"Representative image." It's not a representative image. It's the only one the guy ever got. Or the prettiest one he ever got.

ERROL MORRIS: Are you asked to do much criminal forensic work?

CHRIS RUSSELL: I do some, and a number of my tools go to people who do that. We're constantly battling the CS/ effect. I'm sure you know what that is.

ERROL MORRIS: Tell me.

CHRIS RUSSELL: It's where people watch CS/ on television and assume that we can do all sorts of things that we can't. So they'll keep zooming in on a picture and zooming in and ultimately they turn a pixel into a face. That's science fiction; that's not real. But there are some things that we can do. For instance, when the Hubble telescope went up, it was nearsighted for three years. We had to use it anyway, so we were able to compute just how nearsighted it was and do a mathematical transform called "deconvolution" on it, and with the 15 percent of the light that it did manage to capture, we'd make good pictures out of. Once they fixed the optics, then we were capturing all the light, and the pictures were that much better. There are some things that are doable and there are some things that aren't. I could do amazing things if I could get my hands on this guy's camera and retrace his optics. I could do even better if I could get my hands on his plates, but all we have are these prints.

The problem begins to look intractable. If the contrast levels in the two photographs are different, what does that mean? The hill on the left is darker in ON, lighter in OFF. Was this due to a cloud? Haze? A different time of day? Or something more elusive? Or was it an artifact of how the emulsion was put on the glass plate, or how it was exposed, developed, or printed? With so many variables, how can one ever determine whether the shadows reflect real shadows or some artifact of the photographic process? It was an epistemic shadow.

I was trying to figure out the next step. One possibility: collecting copies of every extant Fenton photograph (from around the world because the Fenton prints had been widely dispersed), comparing them, trying to match the various versions of ON and the various versions of OFF. It seemed painstaking and absurd, but would this be any more absurd than what I had already done?

There is something deeply unsettling about the thought that all the evidence might depend on a print. Which print? Why one print over another? If all the prints are different, where is reality? How can the real world be recovered from the simulacrum? Antonioni's Blow-Up is often taken as an essay on whether reality can be uncovered from a photograph. And it is often assumed that Antonioni argues that it can't be recovered—that the film is a thinly disguised essay on the subjectivity of truth.

I disagree. I believe it is closer to the opposite. David Hemmings, as the photographer in the movie, thinks he sees a gun in the shadows and a corpse in the park. The photographs he takes suggest a gun in the shadows and a corpse in the park. But Antonioni makes it clear they are real—the corpse and the gun are real. We watch as
David Hemmings returns to the park and touches the corpse. We the audience, as well as Hemmings the photographer, know that there is a corpse—there is evidence. There is a fact-of-the-matter. But where is the fact-of-the-matter here?

And then there is the separate issue of posing. Posing is not necessarily deception. Deception is deception. The existence of two versions of “The Valley of the Shadow of Death” is a powerful piece of evidence that points away from the claim that Fenton tried to deceive his audience. On Fenton’s return from the Crimea, his publisher, Thomas Agnew & Sons, organized a show in London of his photographs. If Fenton had intended to deceive, why would he make prints from both glass-plate negatives, and why would he exhibit (and presumably sell) both prints? Curators and photo historians have argued about the meaning of the two photographs, but that’s because they had the two photographs to compare. Fenton never attempted to suppress or hide one of them—quite the contrary, he exhibited both.

ILLUSTRATION #32
FENTON DEDICATION PAGE

In the first major monograph on Fenton, Helmut and Alison Gernsheim’s Roger Fenton: Photographer of the Crimean War: His Photographs and His Letters from the

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Crimea (published in 1954), OFF appears as plate 51. ON does not appear at all. Did the Gernsheims consider OFF the superior photograph? Hadn’t Keller and Sontag (and now Russ) argued that ON was more powerful and aesthetically pleasing?

I contacted Roy Flukinger at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, to get his thoughts on this very question. Flukinger is the curator of the Gernsheim collection, which included many of Fenton's own photographs.

ERROL MORRIS: One thing that has puzzled me—in the Gernsheim book, they reproduce OFF. But more recently and far more often, you see the other photograph reproduced—ON. I'm curious, after Fenton's return from the Crimea: Which photograph did he show? Or did he show both?

ROY FLUKINGER: I'm not certain I could tell you. I do know that probably both were sold in the portfolio sets. But which one he exhibited in his exhibition at the Photographic Society, I don't know.

ERROL MORRIS: But when Helmut Gernsheim turned over the collection to the University of Texas, did he have both photographs? Or did he have only one photograph, namely OFF.

ILLUSTRATION #33
HELMUT GERNHEIM, 1946

Neither camera, nor lens, nor film determine the quality of pictures; it is the visual perception of the man behind the mechanism which brings them to life. Art contains the allied ideas of making and begetting, of being master of one's craft and able to create. Without these properties no art exists and no photographic art can come into being. —Helmut Gernsheim, 1942
ROY FLUKINGER: I'm sure Gernsheim had both in the set, because Gernsheim's collection came from Fenton's own set of Crimean photographs. Now, why Gernsheim chose [OFF] over [ON], I have never been able to find out. I'm right now in the middle of researching and writing a big book on how Gernsheim put his collections together. He very unkindly didn't leave one essay that said how the collection was formed. It's all over Gernsheim's manuscripts, and I'm going through all that right now. I don't think there's anything but the actual mounted prints that date the Fenton photographs in any way, shape, or form. I don't think there's any reference to when one image was made, as opposed to another. I've never seen anything like that anyway. Now one can argue that because of the slowness of the speed and exposures of everything, most of Fenton's images were posed, in terms of people and figures and groups—things like that. So that is, to that extent, a manipulation of quote-unquote "the truth." But I just can't imagine him gathering together a bunch of people and rolling cannonballs out there in that valley to make the picture.

There are two separate issues here—the issue of posing and the question of which came first. And yet, for most people the two issues are inexplicably intertwined. Fenton took the first picture and then posed the second. But it doesn't matter in theory whether OFF came before ON or vice versa, either or both could still be posed. Namely, Fenton could have intentionally posed either or both photographs independent of the order in which they were taken.

One way to look at it: ON could be first and could be posed or unposed, and OFF could be first and could be posed or unposed. Is OFF true and ON false, or vice versa? Or are both equally true? Is one more truthful than the other, because one is more natural than the other? Or authentic? And what is "natural"? Or "authentic"?

Furthermore, is it unnatural to have people move cannonballs? Or inauthentic? Aren't these photographs of human events—even if there are no people in the frame. They are photographs about war. The effects of war. Is war itself natural or authentic? The concepts of naturalness, authenticity, and posing are all slippery slopes that when carefully examined become hopelessly vague.

Meanwhile, my friend Dennis Purcell started scrutinizing the photographs, counting cannonballs, and examining sun angles. And it was he who ultimately put the issue to rest by isolating the essential detail from the many false trails that led nowhere. Dennis looked at the hard facts of the photographs themselves and arrived at a beautiful, absolutely convincing solution, which, once read, seemed simple. But isn't that the essential quality of a great solution? The series of events are as follows:
first no one can figure out the problem, they trot out numerous equivocal solutions, then they hear the solution, which seems so utterly simple, and say: "Now why didn’t I think of that?"

Dennis started by examining individual rocks—their size, shape, and placement. By overlaying the two photographs and looking at them carefully, he found a group of rocks that had moved positions. He named them Fred, George, Oswald, Lionel, and Marmaduke. Perhaps he too had felt the pull of the pathetic fallacy. Were the rocks in the photographs alive, like the cannonballs in Kinglake’s description?

**DENNIS PURCELL:** The direction is downhill. So here’s Lionel in OFF (blue) and here’s Lionel in ON (yellow). Somebody kicked this rock, and it ended up here. Here’s George. All it did was just go a short distance, but it’s a little lower down in ON than it is in OFF. These are small movements. When you just pull out a small section [of the entire photograph], you just get this feeling of something that happened there.

**ILLUSTRATION #34**
**DIAGRAM OF ROCK MOVEMENT**

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ILLUSTRATION #35
FRED, OSWALD, GEORGE, MARMADUKE, AND LIONEL BLUE "ON"

ILLUSTRATION #36
FRED, OSWALD, GEORGE, MARMADUKE, AND LIONEL ORANGE "OFF"
ERROL MORRIS: Wow.

DENNIS PURCELL: These are small movements. This is Lionel here and that's it over there.

ERROL MORRIS: And there is no way to balance the contrast between these two photographs?

DENNIS PURCELL: No. You can for small patches, but not for the image as a whole. Despite all the warping and stuff I did—I couldn't quite make the two whole pictures match. They're very close but shrinkage of the gelatin—or whatever this thing was on—makes it impossible. But you can make a small area match almost precisely, and then as you flip between one and the other, you just say, "What changed here?" If you're looking at a small area—a lot is going on because some balls move and some don't. How big are these cannonballs?

ERROL MORRIS: They're not that big. About the size of a grapefruit. A 24-pounder is smaller than you would think.

DENNIS PURCELL: And here's a small rock. You can sort of see it's got a point and two bumps on it. It's the same one as that. And again, it's moved downhill as though someone carrying something kicked it and it slid. Now it's down here. When you just pull out a smaller section, you just get this feeling of something that happened there. But looking overall you can't do that because the pictures really aren't the same in graininess or contrast, and there's a tremendous amount of garbage in these photos.

ERROL MORRIS: Hold on a second. Here's a picture of Olga Makarova, our Russian guide. I'll try to get the other pictures for you.
DENNIS PURCELL: She looks like she could be a good guide.
ERROL MORRIS: Have I showed you my self-portrait in the Valley of the Shadow of Death?
DENNIS PURCELL: No.
ERROL MORRIS: Let's see if I can find it.

ILLUSTRATION #38
ERROL'S SHADOW

DENNIS PURCELL: That's nice. That's a real Lee Friedlander.
ERROL MORRIS: Thank you. And this is the picture that Bob Chappell took in the Valley of the Shadow of Death.
DENNIS PURCELL: It's the same road. Look at this! There it is. Oh my god. There it is! That's Marmaduke. The picture is pretty darn good. It's quite similar—for one hundred and fifty years. Subtract a few bushes, and you're back to where you were. How many things in the world have changed so little in one hundred and fifty years? How in the world, where there's so much information, can there be such a high level of ignorance? Certainly the more information we get, the higher the level of ignorance seems to be.
What is Dennis saying? I believe he is pointing out the difference between information and knowledge.

**ERROL MORRIS:** So it's based on those two guys, George and Lionel.
**DENNIS PURCELL:** Those two guys plus Marmaduke—or whatever we want to call him. Those two went down. These two went this way. There's one over here and there are others up in here.
**ERROL MORRIS:** So the whole shadow thing turns out to be a red herring. A dead end.
**DENNIS PURCELL:** It doesn't give us the answers we're looking for. If you matched the contrast in the two photographs perfectly, there hardly seems to be any difference.
**ERROL MORRIS:** Yet from the motion of rocks, you can determine which photograph was taken first.
**DENNIS PURCELL:** Absolutely. First look at the motion of the rocks, then look at the photographs. The rocks move from up to down if OFF precedes ON.

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I feel the gravity argument is very strong. If you stepped up to pick up something, you'd just kick a stone or two. The smaller is the more significant because no one would have noticed that and no one would have kicked it uphill by accident. I find that pretty strongly. And I find the sun angle business ambiguous and paradoxical. The shadows are not that different. If you add and subtract contrast, the shadow position is almost the same. You do it and you say, "Which one of these is different in which way?" You can't tell because the slightest amount of adding or subtracting contrast, darkening this and lightening this, moves the shadow. So there really isn't much difference between the shadows in ON and OFF. You can move that shadow around the ball just by lightening and darkening it. I don't get much out of the shadows, but I get a lot out of the little guys who were kicked aside. Some of those rocks, those main boulders, they're still there. The cannonballs are gone, but the rocks are still there. It would be nice to find that funny one with the two bumps and the nose. The rocks have very distinct characters, whereas the cannonballs have none.

One is tempted to say, following Chris Russ and Archimedes, "Eureka!" Dennis has found the solution. When the rocks are uphill—before they have been dislodged—the cannonballs are off the road [OFF]. Then, you look at the rocks after they have been dislodged—rocks that were kicked and then tumbled downhill—the cannonballs are on the road [ON]. In short, the first shot had to be taken when the balls were uphill. We can see: rocks up, cannonballs off the road. And, the second shot, when the balls tumble down a bit, rocks down, cannonballs on the road. It is the law of gravity that allows us to order the photographs.

And yet, a second, central question remains: were either [OFF] or [ON] posed? Or both? We may know the order of the photographs, but that doesn't mean we know whether they were "authentic" or deliberately posed. I asked Dennis Purcell about this question, and he turned to the question of authenticity in a more general sense.

DENNIS PURCELL: Take the question of the moon landing. There are people who believe that it was fabricated in a studio. The question is, how do you really know they're on the moon? It's pretty simple. Because the dust that they kicked up fell straight to the ground.

ERROL MORRIS: It did?
DENNIS PURCELL: It didn't float. It dropped. It was very strange-looking. The dust that they kicked up instantly plunged straight down in a way that no dust on Earth would.

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ERROL MORRIS: Dust on Earth is suspended by the Brownian motion of molecules in the atmosphere, but there is no atmosphere on the moon.

DENNIS PURCELL: Yes. There were people saying that they faked it. They never were on the moon. They just did it in their training camp in the Black Hills or wherever it was they trained. But you can't fake dust plunging straight down. There's no way to do that.

The dust-plunging-straight-down test. I had a strange intuition. What about a different kind of test—about the notion of "posing"? A thought experiment. Say, for the sake of argument, Susan Sontag is right. Fenton posed one of the photographs, but she's wrong about the order. They are in the reverse order (ON before OFF) to the one claimed by Sontag, Keller, and Haworth-Booth and established by Dennis Purcell.

Consider this hypothetical story. Fenton came across the balls on the road and scattered them on the hillside, thereby posing the picture that he took of the road without the balls on it (OFF). It doesn't matter why he did it—just that he intended to do it. It wasn't inadvertent. But then OFF is posed, and it's posed because of the absence of something. The cannonballs should have, could have been there, but Fenton altered the landscape by removing them from the road.

Couldn't you argue that every photograph is posed because every photograph excludes something? Even in framing and cropping? Someone has made a decision about what time-slice to expose on the emulsion, what space-slice (i.e., the frame) to expose on the emulsion. Fenton could have had an elephant in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, plus all the workers you might imagine heaving cannonballs about. The elephant could have been walking through the frame of Fenton's camera, and Fenton waited until the elephant had just cleared the frame. Click. (Or removed the lens cap, the method in mid-nineteenth-century photography.) Or told Sparling, his assistant: “Get rid of the elephant.” But in that event, he posed the photograph by excluding something. He posed the photograph, but how would you know? The photograph is posed not by the presence of the elephant but by its absence. Isn't something always excluded, an elephant or something else? Isn't there always a possible elephant lurking just at the edge of the frame?
For those who object to this experiment (and there have been a couple) because there were no elephants in the Crimea, I urge them to substitute a dromedary—like the one photographed by Fenton in the Crimea in 1856.
As preposterous as it may seem, I would like to make the claim that the meaning of photography is contained in these two images. By thinking about the Fenton photographs we are essentially thinking about some of the most vexing issues in photography—about posing, about the intentions of the photographer, about the nature of photographic evidence—about the relationship between photographs and reality. We also have the first motion picture because we have two images in sequence. We just don’t know (at first) what the sequence is because they are not conjoined in celluloid.

Isn’t much of science the attempt to fill in what happened between two moments of time, $t_0$ and $t_1$? To explain how and why something changed?

Shortly after our discussion, Dennis sent me a note. It indicated he had not only matched my level of obsession, but also contained a solution to the puzzle.

Dear Errol:

I’ve worked some more on the images, and with warping and equalization have brought them a bit more into sync, so that quickly flipping between the two pictures reveals more of the detail and less of the distracting large-scale brightness differences. When you do flip them, making a two-image movie, you see of course a lot of change in cannonball location. But you also

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see movement of non-cannonball features. And my case rests (quite firmly, I think) on the two close-up views. These show movement of inconspicuous rocks that have been kicked, jostled or vibrated. Each one has ended up lower down the hill. I haven't found any that went the other way.

It is really difficult to imagine a scenario in which all these objects, at some distance from each other, would spontaneously move uphill. So I just can't see any way in which the cannonballs-on-the-road view comes first.
Some less conclusive but corroborating evidence: a very careful count shows that there are the same number of balls in both pictures (about 250, if I remember correctly). So no one has gone around policing the balls for reuse or any other reason. They have been removed from the surrounding area and placed on the road. Another point, and this is only an impression, is that the placement of balls on the road is too nicely and evenly "random." It's sort of like the error that people make when they try to invent a "random" sequence of numbers: much too well distributed and avoiding runs and oddities. Here, the dynamic physical forces and rough terrain form a kinetic system in which there will not likely be a nice pattern spread out in open space (and nicely in camera-range) but rather a strong tropism for local minima—which we see in the first picture where most of the balls are "in the gutter" or in depressions on the hillside.

Dennis

Dennis has solved the problem. It is gravity and the movement on the rocks. The rocks in OFF move downhill to the position they are found in ON. We may not know exactly how the cannonballs got on the road, but we do know OFF came before ON. The cannonballs set up the problem but are irrelevant to its solution. There is no way—at least as far as I can see—to wiggle out of his argument. And so, it turns out that Keller, Haworth-Booth, and Sontag are all right. It is OFF before ON. I tried hard to prove that Keller and Sontag were wrong—to prove that ON came before OFF. I failed. I can't deny it. But I did prove that they were right for the wrong reasons. It is not their assessment of Fenton's character or lack of character that establishes the order of the pictures. Nor is it sun angle and shadow. Rather it is the motion of ancillary rocks—rocks that had been kicked, nudged, displaced between the taking of one picture and the other. Rocks that no one cared about. "Those little guys that got kicked aside," as Dennis called them. Their displacement was recorded on those wet collodion plates not because someone wanted to record it. It happened inadvertently. Ancillary rocks, ancillary evidence—essential information.

The one thing that we know about the rocks—Marmaduke, George, Lionel, Oswald, and Fred—is that they were not posed. No one noticed them, let alone posed them. But together they helped unlock the secret of how to order the Fenton photographs.

Photographs preserve information. They record data. They present evidence. Not because of our intentions but often in spite of them. Sontag, Keller, and Haworth-Booth could be right about the order of the photographs, but nothing that they have said shows that one photograph—either ON or OFF—or both photographs were posed. The change in the photographs suggests that Fenton may have moved the cannonballs for aesthetic or other reasons. But we can never know for sure. And even if Sontag is right, namely, that Fenton moved the cannonballs to telegraph the horrors of war, what's so bad about that? Why does moralizing about
"posing" take precedence—moral precedence—over moralizing about the carnage of war? Is purism of the photography police blinding them to the human tragedy the cannonballs represent?

At the very end of my discussion with Roy Flukinger, he turned to the mystery of photographs—the mystery of recording light and shadow without telling us what they mean.

ROY FLUKINGER: It's one of the fascinating things about photo history. It always gives us more questions than answers. Historical photographs may give you the possibility of new facts, and may give you the chance to ask new questions. The thing I like about old photographs is that they offer me a different sort of visual, and hopefully, therefore, emotional experience of what I'm looking at, that words can't do, or that words can only do part of.

ERROL MORRIS: Something beyond language?

ROY FLUKINGER: Definitely. There's a whole other level that reaches a person through the eyes. And I just find that fascinating.

ERROL MORRIS: How would you describe that "other level"?

ROY FLUKINGER: Photography has a certain immediacy—not only in the taking, but also at the end of the equation, the presenting of the image to a viewer. There's a strong chance for distortion of fact or for inadequate—no, not inadequate, shall we say, limited amount of experience. But there's always something that's possible to be revealed and shared in the process. If you sit down and really lay out these portfolios of prints on a table, and look at them for an afternoon—we've got a big wall easel here so we can lay out a bunch of them—and you move them around and look at them, you really get a sense of what it must have been like to be there—even a level of goose-bump experience. That's the sort of power that photography can have. If you're looking at the original prints the way the photographer printed them, and wanted to make them known, that possibility is enhanced, even beyond just what's reproduced in a book.

ERROL MORRIS: The feeling of being there?

ROY FLUKINGER: At least a better sense of being there, a better sense of the emotional experience that went into the creation of the image. Fenton was there—freezing his butt off and getting in the mud and everything else. That's something you experience when you look at the roughness of the prints and the detail of the imagery—that is, when you stop and look at what's there in the photographs.
Postscript

History is always incomplete. There is always the possibility that new historical evidence can be found. A safe crammed with documents, photographs in a hatbox, a packet of letters tied with a faded yellow ribbon. I spoke with Dennis Purcell recently and asked, “Do you think these essays will put this issue—the issue of which came first—finally to rest?” Dennis replied, “No, I don’t think so. There could be some guy who reads your essays, writes in, and says: ‘You know, there aren’t just two photographs. I found another. There are actually three.’”

ILLUSTRATION #44
TOLSTOY VS. FENTON

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ABU GHRAIB ESSAY

PHOTOGRAPHS REVEAL AND CONCEA...
It was arguably one of the least newsworthy pictures in the world, if only because it had already been seen by everybody. And yet, on March 11, 2006, the New York Times published on the front page of the first section, in the upper left-hand corner, a photograph of a man holding the photograph that had been seen around the world.
Ali Shalal Qaissi, the man shown holding the photograph, had come forward as “The Hooded Man.”

The Hooded Man, no longer anonymous, became a national news story—not because he was a victim of torture and abuse at Abu Ghraib but because he was in an infamous photograph. The accompanying story in the *Times* made this clear. The article was written by Hassan M. Fattah.

Amman, Jordan, March 8—Almost two years later, Ali Shalal Qaissi’s wounds are still raw. There is the mangled hand, an old injury that became infected by the shackles chafing his skin. There's the slight limp, made worse by days tied in uncomfortable positions. And most of all, there are the nightmares of his nearly six-month ordeal at Abu Ghraib prison in 2003 and 2004.

Mr. Qaissi, 43, was prisoner 151716 of Cellblock 1A. The picture of him standing hooded atop a cardboard box, attached to electrical wires with his arms stretched wide in an eerily prophetic pose, became the indelible symbol of the torture at Abu Ghraib, west of Baghdad.

Put simply: without the iconic photograph, it’s likely there would have been little or no interest in Qaissi or his story. Qaissi was not the first ex-prisoner at Abu Ghraib to be interviewed by human rights workers, but he was the first to be profiled on page one of the *Times*. (Although the *Times* did not use the expression “iconic photograph,” it did call the photo “the indelible symbol of torture.” It might amount to the same thing.)

The picture was captioned “Ali Shalal Qaissi in Amman, Jordan, recently with the picture of himself standing atop a box and attached to electrical wires in Abu Ghraib.”

The story continues with a quote from Qaissi:

“I never wanted to be famous, especially not in this way,” he said, as he sat in a squalid office rented by his friends here in Amman. That said, he is now a prisoner advocate who clearly understands the power of the image: it appears on his business card.

At first glance, there is little to connect Mr. Qaissi with the infamous picture of a hooded man except his left hand, which he says was disfigured when an antique rifle exploded in his hands at a wedding several years ago. A disfigured hand also seems visible in the infamous picture, and features prominently in Mr. Qaissi’s outlook on life. In Abu Ghraib, the hand, with two swollen fingers, one of them partly blown off, and a deep gash in the palm, earned him the nickname “Clawman,” he said.
Symbol of Abu Ghraib Seeks to Spare Others His Nightmare

The Times hedged its bets and wrote, “A disfigured hand also seems visible...” It left open the possibility that what appeared to be a disfigured hand might be something else. The International Herald Tribune, however, was more definite. It said simply, “A disfigured hand shows up in the photograph.”

But it isn’t a disfigured hand, and Qaisi isn’t The Hooded Man.

The first questions arose two days later on Salon, when Michael Scherer presented army documents, photographs, and files “suggesting that the paper had identified the wrong man.”

In response to this and other criticism, the Times formally admitted the error in a March 18 article, and in an editors’ note that tried to explain how the mistake had been made:

The Times did not adequately research Mr. Qaisi’s insistence that he was the man in the photograph. Mr. Qaisi’s account had already been broadcast...
and printed by other outlets, including PBS and *Vanity Fair*, without challenge. Lawyers for former prisoners at Abu Ghraib vouched for him. Human rights workers seemed to support his account. The Pentagon, asked for verification, declined to confirm or deny it.

The *Times*’s public editor, Byron Calame, commented upon the error one week later, focusing on the reporters’ use of sources. The human rights workers cited in the story had never said they believed Qaissi was the man in the photograph, only that it was possible. Moreover, the article did not mention its reliance on the earlier stories, quietly taking their identification of Qaissi for the truth.

But there was one aspect of the controversy—the most crucial aspect—that was overlooked. No one acknowledged the central role that photography itself played in the mistaken identification, the way that photography lends itself to those errors and may even engender them.

I spoke to Hassan Fattah, author of the *Times* article that identified The Hooded Man. A graduate of the Columbia School of Journalism and correspondent for the *Times* in the Middle East, he was unusually honest and forthcoming in our discussion. I was impressed by the way he spoke about his attempts to verify Qaissi’s account. It was certainly not something he shrugged off. He called the week that the story was discredited the worst week in his career. It was a journalist’s worst nightmare.

**HASSAN FATTAH:** I basically was assigned the story. I was told to go see this guy who had been on Italian TV and had been interviewed several times elsewhere. I spent a few days trying to find him, actually. And he actually pulled out one or two times, and then finally was willing to meet me. I’m Iraqi myself, Iraqi-American. I worked in Iraq for a long time.

And I sat with him for a very, very long time and we talked. He’s a very compelling figure. You spoke to him, didn’t you?

**ERROL MORRIS:** Yes, but with difficulty. You would, of course, have had a much easier time.

**HASSAN FATTAH:** You spoke to him in English, obviously?

**ERROL MORRIS:** There was a translator. But we had trouble understanding each other. The poor phone connection, the constant stopping and starting for translation made conversation difficult. But he remembered Sabrina Harman [one of the MPs who guarded him at Abu Ghraib]. He told me that he liked her and asked if I could relay a message to her. He wanted her to speak on behalf of his organization. I wish I could have met him in person.
HASSAN FATTAH: I sat with him for a while because I just felt there was something too good about this story. But I kept in mind several things. First of all, he was able to describe the whole environment and everything that happened very, very accurately, in terms of how other people were describing it. He described the details of it and other aspects. It was very interesting that he knew the place so very well. He had a prisoner number, and he spoke about other prisoners that were there. He clearly had been in the prison, and we just needed to confirm that. And then I asked him, "Can you point yourself out in the picture?" And he got on his computer and he printed out the picture. And then we took his picture holding up that picture. And he said, "Here it is. Here's my hand. Can you see it?" And then we looked at the picture, and the picture of the hand, and it looks very much like his hand. It turned out later that actually there is a high-resolution picture that came out that shows that it's not his hand. I wish I had gotten that earlier. But that was the series of data points that our decision was based on.

ERROL MORRIS: So part of the problem was that the photograph was low-res and you couldn't clearly see his deformed hand? That in some odd way, the photo was presented as definitive identification, but that Qaisi's most distinguishing feature wasn't visible?

HASSAN FATTAH: Yes. But he was able to describe the prison, the dynamics of the prison, and everything that was happening quite accurately. He had a very vivid memory of where the light fixtures were. The question was how do we really confirm his identity. I did talk first to Human Rights Watch, and then to Amnesty International. Human Rights Watch felt that yeah, this is the guy, we've known of him before, but they were a little tentative about it. So I talked to Amnesty and the guy—I forget his name, a German man who had spoken to him several times, in fact. He had referred to him on different issues about other prisoners and conditions in Abu Ghraib. So the Amnesty representative knew him well. He helped me go through the list of
prisoners, and there he was on the list. That step proved he definitely was in Abu Ghraib, and we had the data for that. We have some of the pictures. And then he was quite convinced that he was the man. At least that's how he said it. Of course, afterwards, he changed his story.

But it was ultimately Susan Burke [legal counsel acting on behalf of the Abu Ghraib torture victims] who sealed it for me. She went through the whole thing. They had the blanket, they had a lot of circumstantial evidence that linked Qassisi to the image. And she was very, very confident he was the one. The fact that they had the blanket was important to me. So we moved ahead with the story—

ERROL MORRIS: I'm sorry to interrupt, but when you said, "She had the blanket," what does that mean? That she had the physical blanket?

HAJSSAN FATTAH: Yes, she had the physical blanket that he was wearing. They gave them blankets, and she walked me through this. Most of the time they were naked. And we know this; this is now on the record. And they gave them blankets at some point. And so they cut holes in the blankets and used them like ponchos. It ended up being a piece of clothing, and that's what they slept with. Now, they had this poncho. And she felt that it was exactly the same poncho as the one in the picture. She had a bunch of other evidence that seemed to suggest this was true. And from there we went to the military and asked them to help us confirm his identity. At first they said, "Oh, yes, we've heard of him before and we'll get back to you." And then the day afterwards—this is not to me, but to somebody who knows the military well, who did that reporting—they said, "We are not able to discuss this issue because it will violate his Geneva Convention rights." So we ended up with all these different data points. And by the end I was convinced: this was the guy. His story was very accurate. It was also a very compelling story, but he wasn't bitter about it. He was going to use this experience to help out some of the former prisoners. Obviously, the lawsuit that they [Human Rights Watch] have going is a big piece of the puzzle. This was going to be his way of getting some proper restitution. What is clear is that he was a man who was at Abu Ghraib, there's no doubt about that. There was no reason for him to jeopardize this lawsuit. Why would he ruin it for himself by lying to the press? So we ran with the story. At some point we decided, okay, everything seems to stick.

ERROL MORRIS: And there had already been other news stories about him.

HAJSSAN FATTAH: Yes. There have been several profiles of him before in mainstream places. There was nothing that would suggest, after two years of this guy being out there, that this guy was not the man. There was nobody else who came up and said, "This was me." There were court records. But because I didn't cover the courts-martial I had not actually seen them. That proved to be the fatal flaw in my reporting. If I had to do it over again, if I'd seen the whole series of the latest photographs that had come out and
had seen the courts-martial records first, and had ignored the fuzzy picture itself, I would have probably remained skeptical and would have held off for a lot longer. Probably I wouldn’t have done the story at all. More importantly, the more interesting story was the fact that these guys were around and were starting to talk to people. That there was the whole group of Abu Ghraib prisoners that had organized, and they were meeting with the lawyers the week that I was reporting the story.

**ERROL MORRIS:** Yes.

**HASAN FATTAH:** And then we went to press, and the doubts about his identity came out. I called Qaissi and was talking to him, and it turned out that the lawyers were there with him, Susan Burke and her associates. Anyway, the lawyers were there with him, and they sought to convince me that he was telling the truth. Then it became apparent that they had nothing that could properly refute the allegations. And then he [Qaissi] finally admitted that the picture he printed out was not actually a picture of him. That's when it was all over—

**ERROL MORRIS:** And who did he admit that to?

**HASAN FATTAH:** He finally admitted it to me. He knew he was lying.

**ERROL MORRIS:** But wait. Is it clear that he knew he was lying?

**HASAN FATTAH:** Maybe not. He still insists he's the real thing—and I've run into him several times since—and he continues to come to me and apologize, and continues to insist, "Please understand, I am in one of those pictures." I personally believe there are many pictures, and he is probably the next guy in line. We do have some photographs in the same space, around the same time. We also have him with the blanket. We have seen him in other poses as well as the orange jumpsuit that he was wearing that said "Claw Man" on the back of it. There's enough to suggest that he was in the space, he had been part of this, he had been involved and he had witnessed everything. But once he admitted that—"I am not the man in the photograph"—that was it. What more could I say? I realized I had been had. And then we had to do the retraction. What to me makes this especially a tragedy is that in many ways it detracted from his real story.

Susan Burke, the attorney who represents many of the torture victims, also suggested that it made no difference whether Qaissi, The Claw, was also really The Hooded Man—that his testimony is no less valid. This opinion was echoed by Donovan Webster, a *Vanity Fair* reporter, who argued that Ali Shalal Qaissi was doubtlessly subject to similar abuse:
As the reporter who first interviewed Qaissi—or as I called him, Haj Ali—for *Vanity Fair*, I was scrupulous to qualify that while he says the abuse happened to him (and his lawyer now has medical records to prove he was electrified), there might have been more than one person subjected to the same treatment, and we will likely never know unless someone else associated with the incident steps forward. During my months of reporting that story, I pushed to learn if there was more than one “hooded man on the box,” but, predictably, got nowhere with U.S. Army spokespeople, the Abu Ghraib soldiers present who were still available for comment, or several senators and congressmen working on a variety of Abu Ghraib investigations and commissions. Nonetheless, the army’s own records place Haj Ali on Tier 1A at the time of the Abu Ghraib abuses, and Haj Ali maintains that these abuses happened to him with the kinds of consistent, telling details that lead many to believe he is telling the truth. To discount the horrors visited upon this man because the famous photo shows a different detainee on the box—and to disbelieve what happened because no photo currently confirms it—well, it shows just how much of an abstraction torture has become inside American culture. Long to short: the issue is not about “individual interpretations of reality” or photographic imagery inspiring unearned lunges for international fame. It is about the idea at least two people might have been abused in a similar manner, but only one can produce a digital image to prove it.

I believe we are talking about two different things. The Claw was a prisoner at Abu Ghraib. He was most likely subjected to abuse, but whatever happened to him, whatever his account might be, it’s not the same as being the man in the picture.

And there is also the question of what Qaissi really believed, and what was going on inside his head. Had he also been hooded and put on a box with wires attached to him? In other words, was he a hooded man, but not The Hooded Man? If that was the case, he could have easily come to believe that he was The Hooded Man. If he truly believed that he was The Hooded Man, then he was innocent of conscious manipulation or misrepresentation.

But if The Claw was not The Hooded Man, and he knew it, why would he have made this false claim? Why would he have printed business cards with a drawing of The Hooded Man displayed next to his name? Did he see it as a business opportunity, as well as an opportunity to speak out against American policies in Iraq?

Human rights workers and prisoners needed a spokesperson to dramatize the growing evidence for abuses at Abu Ghraib and at other U.S. military prisons around the world. The Hooded Man was an ideal candidate—a living symbol of abuse. An icon. Susan Burke and Human Rights Watch had filed a class-action suit on behalf of Qaissi and several other named prisoners from Abu Ghraib. Qaissi had suffered at Abu Ghraib, and he had an interest in being heard. This is not to say that he or
anyone else was involved in conscious fraud. But it is to say that there were pressures on everyone to believe that Qaissi was the man under the hood. For the lawyers, he was the centerpiece of litigation against torture at Abu Ghraib. For journalists, he presented the opportunity, on a date approaching the two-year anniversary of the release of the photographs, to tell the real story behind the most infamous among them. For the public, his story offered the allure of a solved mystery linked to a major scandal in American history.

Years ago I became enamored with the writings of Norwood Russell Hanson, a philosopher and ex-fighter pilot who died at the age of forty-three while flying his own plane to a lecture engagement at Cornell. Long before Thomas Kuhn’s paradigms and Michael Polanyi’s tacit knowledge, Hanson pioneered the idea that observations in science are not independent of theory but are, on the contrary, quite dependent on it. In his book, *Patterns of Discovery*, published in 1958, Hanson coined the term “theory-laden” and wrote: “There is more to seeing than meets the eyeball.” Hanson had taken these ideas in part from Wittgenstein. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein uses a gestalt figure called the duck-rabbit, which can be seen either as a duck or a rabbit. The rabbit is facing right and the duck is facing left.²

To use the familiar gestalt image of the duck-rabbit: if we believe we see a rabbit, we see a rabbit. If we believe we see a duck, we see a duck. But the situation is even worse than the Gestalt psychologists imagined. Our beliefs can completely defeat
sensory evidence. If we believe that we see The Claw in the photograph, then we see The Claw in the photograph, even though all we are looking at is a hooded man draped in a blanket, standing on a box, with only his legs and hands visible. The left hand might look disfigured, but the photograph has been taken with a low-resolution digital camera that provides limited evidence one way or the other. That we believe The Claw to be the man in the photograph does not mean he is the man in the photograph. Our beliefs do not determine what is true or false. They do not determine objective reality. But they can determine what we “see.”

There is yet another wrinkle to this. From this complex story about a photograph, its interpretation and reinterpretation, emerges another photograph and another story. The photograph of Qaissi holding the photograph of The Hooded Man. A photo of a photo. This photograph was the final piece of evidence in Qaissi’s claim to be The Hooded Man, even though it had no evidentiary value. Sadly, the new photograph for the Times also retained the same ambiguity, the same problematic lack of information, as the original photograph.

Take another look at the photograph that appeared in the Times. The Claw is seen standing holding the iconic photograph, but only his right hand is visible. His left hand is framed out of the photograph. His deformed hand is hidden. Intentionally? Unintentionally?
The *Times* photographer who took the shot could have helped me sort through these possibilities, but he declined to be interviewed, insisting when I reached him by phone in Cairo that the photograph was a “false” photograph and that he didn’t want to discuss it. I tried to reassure him. There was nothing false about the photograph. The photograph is simply a photograph of Qaissi holding a photograph of The Hooded Man, which is neither true nor false. “Yes,” I told him, “there was something false about Qaissi’s claim that he was the man under the hood, but the photograph itself is not making that claim. The photograph is just a photograph.”

I asked Hassan what he remembered about the photo shoot.

**HASSAN FATTAH:** Although we took frames of his hand, Qaissi had sought to keep his hand out of the frame in this photo, as I remember it. It was as if he had the image and the shot already orchestrated in his mind.

Was there a conscious decision made to crop the photograph, or to frame the image in such a way as to leave out the left hand? Or was it something subtler, possibly intangible? Presumably, many photographs were taken, and this photograph was chosen because the image is more powerful, more mysterious, without the hand. Quite often photographs gain power from what is omitted from the frame rather than from what is included. This one leaves the question of what Qaissi’s “claw” might look like open to the imagination.

But framing out the left hand from the photo merely aids and abets the mystery. As such, the photograph should be a constant reminder—not of how photographs can be true or false—but of how we can make false inferences from a photograph. Photography presents things and at the same time hides things from our view, and the coupling of photography and language provides an express train to error.

The nickname is part of the problem. Like many of the names given to prisoners at Abu Ghraib by the MPs who guarded them, “The Claw” recalls characters from American popular culture—comic books, television, movies. The name conjures up an image of a seriously deformed hand—a pincer or worse. And because we have no picture of the claw itself, we are free to imagine anything from a broken finger that didn’t heal properly to a horribly disfigured, well, claw. These imaginings are based on seeing nothing and imagining everything.

*Will the Real Hooded Man Please Stand Up?*
When my friend Charles Silver finally saw the photograph below of Qaissi’s actual hand, he was disappointed. He felt it wasn’t really a claw, and that he had been misled. He suggested that The Claw’s hand was not shown in the original article because readers might have concluded that he was an impostor, based on the comparative normalcy of the hand.
Qaissi was given the nickname by Hydrue Joyner, the staff sergeant who supervised the day shift that guarded prisoners on Tier 1A at Abu Ghraib.

I spoke with Sgt. Joyner about The Claw:

**ERROL MORRIS:** And The Claw? How did he get his name?

**HYDRUE JOYNER:** The Claw? Dr. Claw. Oh, yeah, Dr. Claw. I don't know if you ever saw that movie, *Scary Movie: Part 2*, where the guy had the hand and everything? He had a hand just like that. I couldn't think of anything else but Dr. Claw. That wasn't my fault. I work with the material that I have, and he just provided material for me, so that's how he ended up with the name "Dr. Claw."

**ERROL MORRIS:** Are you the one responsible for naming all these people?

**HYDRUE JOYNER:** Yes, it's my fault. I named all of them. And it came to a point where because of the nicknames I gave them, we were able to identify them a lot easier than Detainee #67328. It got to a point where I would call them by their nickname and they would answer, "Yes, here." So it became a popular thing. The detainees liked it. I tried to make it somewhat entertaining. It was still jail but you can still laugh in jail. It's not a crime, I hope.

Sergeant Joyner also had a nickname for Detainee #18470, whose real name was Abdou Hussain Saad Faleh. He called him "Gilligan" because he was so skinny. (I continue to use the nicknames—The Claw and Gilligan—not out of disrespect for the prisoners involved but because the nickname is an essential part of the story of misidentification.) Gilligan is the real Hooded Man.

While working on *Standard Operating Procedure*, a film about the infamous photographs of Abu Ghraib, I interviewed many of the MPs who were involved. Principal among them was Sabrina Harman, who had taken some of the Hooded Man photographs. Sabrina offered considerable evidence that Gilligan was the real Hooded Man.

Sabrina remembers both The Claw and Gilligan vividly. She photographed both of them on the same night. Gilligan, as his name implies, was slight of build. The Claw was heavyset. There was no doubt in Sabrina's mind. "Gilligan was on the box," she told me, "not The Claw." The Claw was her prisoner, and he was not put on a box, nor attached to wires. According to Sabrina, "The Claw weighed over three hundred pounds. If The Claw had been put on an MRE [Meals Ready to Eat] box, he would have crushed it." For me this is one of those telling little details that give her account the ring of truth.

But both The Claw and Gilligan were interrogated in the same area of Abu Ghraib, Tier 1A, on the night that the Hooded Man photographs were taken. *Salon* reported
on an e-mail from Qaissi: “I have seen at least two pictures showing this dreadful experience....One is me. The other I believe could be Saad because he went before me to the area I had to go, where I was to be interrogated.”

There are multiple photographs taken on November 3, 2003, on Tier 1A, Abu Ghraib—the night of the Hooded Man photograph. Both Salon and I had copies of these photographs, which were collected by the Criminal Investigation Division (CID) of the U.S. Army for use in the varied courts-martial related to the Abu Ghraib abuse photographs. I don’t believe the Times had a copy prior to the publication of its story.

In the photograph below, you can clearly see that The Claw is fully clothed in an orange jumpsuit, which has been labeled on the back in black Magic Marker “The Claw” above a crude caricature of a deformed hand. He is shown to be stocky and made to kneel on the floor, not stand on a box. The detail photograph of his hand was taken the same night as he was apparently made to proffer it.
Gilligan, by contrast, is hooded and wearing only a black blanket or poncho. He’s photographed from different angles and by different cameras. There are two (virtually identical) “iconic” photographs of The Hooded Man taken within one second of each other by Sergeant Ivan Frederick with a Deluxe Classic Cam. Both of these photographs are comparatively low-resolution: $640 \times 480$ (0.3 megapixels) and were taken without a flash. (Since they are virtually identical—the second one seems to be only slightly panned to the right—I will write about them as essentially one photograph.)

ILLUSTRATION #54
EXIF FILE PHOTO D-20

| Photo D-20 |
| Camera Make: Mercury Peripherals Inc. |
| Camera Model: Deluxe Classic Cam |
| Camera Date/Time: 2003.11.05 00:01:18 |
| Baghdad Date/Time: 2003.11.04 23:01:18 |

ILLUSTRATION #55
PHOTO D-20

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And then there is a wide-angle shot of Gilligan on the box taken by Sabrina Harman. Sergeant Ivan Frederick, who took the two previous pictures, is standing on the right side of the frame. This photograph was taken approximately three minutes later with the FD Mavica, which has a much higher resolution: 1280 × 1600 (2.0 megapixels, more than six times the resolution of the iconic photographs), and was taken with a flash.
For me, it is by far the more interesting photograph. It shows Frederick looking at the picture he has just taken—a picture that was destined to become a photograph seen around the world. What is he thinking? It is unlikely that he imagined this image printed in newspapers and displayed on computer screens everywhere. We are looking at the photograph of Frederick looking at his photograph of The Hooded Man with The Hooded Man in the background.

Such a photograph would have been impossible during World War II, when professional photographers like Joe Rosenthal were covering the war. Rosenthal never even saw his photo of the flag raising at Iwo Jima until it made the papers. The Hooded Man is a radically modern image, insofar as it shows someone looking at an image instantaneously displayed on a digital camera screen while the “reality” behind that image is seen clearly next to him.

I have often wondered why it was Frederick’s photograph, and not Sabrina Harman’s photograph, that became iconic. (It is even possible to create a facsimile of Frederick’s photograph by cropping Harman’s, save that Frederick’s is in portrait mode and Harman’s in landscape mode, and there is more “room” under the box in Frederick’s photograph. Also, there is a soft shadow behind The Hooded Man in Frederick’s photo, a hard shadow behind Frederick in Harman’s photo.) My belief is that Harman’s photograph is more complicated and requires context. Who is that man standing on the right of the frame? He seems disengaged. What is he doing? When I interviewed Lieutenant Colonel Steve Jordan,4 who was the director of the Joint Interrogation and Debriefing Center (JIDC) at Abu Ghraib, he described the picture to me as a picture of Sergeant Frederick clipping his nails. It was only after I explained to him that Frederick was looking at the photograph he had just taken that Jordan realized he had misinterpreted what he was looking at. It makes a big difference. In
one version Frederick is indifferent to the scene next to him; in the other, he is con-
templating his image of it—an image that he saw the need to record and preserve.

Frederick’s picture—the one that became iconic—has no one else in the frame. It is stripped of context, like the gestalt duck-rabbit, ambiguous and open to inter-
pretation.

Photographs attract false beliefs the way flypaper attracts flies. Why my skepti-
cism? Because vision is privileged in our society and our sensorium. We trust it; we place our confidence in it. Photography allows us to uncritically think. We imagine
that photographs provide a magic path to the truth.

What’s more, photographs allow us to think we know more than we really do. We can imagine a context that isn’t really there. In the pre-photographic era, images came directly from our eyes to our brains and were part of our experience of reality. With the advent of photography, images were torn free from the world, snatched from the fabric of reality, and enshrined as separate entities. They became more like dreams. It is no wonder that we really don’t know how to deal with them.

The New York Times’s public editor, in his March 26, 2006, article about the mis-
identification, suggested that lack of research was the problem.
He focused on the evidence in the archives of his own paper:

Embarrassingly, evidence to prevent the whole mess was in The Times's archives. In an article on May 22, 2004, the paper had correctly identified the man in the photograph as Abdou Hussain Saad Faleh. Ethan Bronner, deputy foreign editor, wrote to me in an e-mail that editors had done several searches of the paper's archives using various keywords. He said editors now realize that one search—using the terms "Abu Ghraib," "box" and "hood"—missed the crucial May 2004 article because it didn't contain the word "hood."

My test of the same three search words last week, however, turned up two Times articles from last year reporting that the man in the famous photograph had been called "Gilligan" by guards at Abu Ghraib. Mr. Qaissi, according to the March 11 story, had been nicknamed "Clawman." The contradictory nicknames, it seems to me, should have spurred more intensive search efforts and raised an overall caution flag.

Mr. Bronner disputes the value of the two stories with "Gilligan" references. He said editors had come across at least one of them in their searches, but hadn't considered it significant. Among other things, he said, it wasn't clear then that Mr. Qaissi had only one nickname.

The detail about the extra search term "hood" obscuring "the crucial May 2004 article" is telling. It wasn't that the article was overlooked. Bronner says they saw the "Gilligan" reference but "hadn't considered it significant." I would suggest it was because Bronner already believed that the photo of Qaissi was The Hooded Man. And so he turned to a clunky, speculation-laden theory—that The Hooded Man was called both "Clawman" (or "The Claw") and "Gilligan"—rather than questioning his belief in Qaissi's story.

But the failure to look at certain kinds of evidence may be explained by the belief that a proof had already been offered, that there was already enough evidence to make the case. Yes, there was archival material that could have cast suspicion on the claim that The Claw was also The Hooded Man. But the mistaken identification was driven by The Claw's own desire to be the iconic victim, to be The Hooded Man, and our own need to believe him. It is an error engendered by photography and perpetuated by us. And it comes from a desire for "the ocular proof," a proof that turns out to be no proof at all. What we see is not independent of our beliefs. Photographs provide evidence, but no shortcut to reality. It is often said that seeing is believing. But we do not form our beliefs on the basis of what we see; rather, what we see is often determined by our beliefs. Believing is seeing, not the other way around.

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When the *Times* identified The Hooded Man, it provided the solution to a mystery—a who-is-under-it, rather than a whodunnit. But the *Times* piece also allayed our fears and perhaps assuaged our collective guilt about what happened to The Hooded Man. Perhaps there was a collective sigh of relief when we learned that he survived. Perhaps there was a sense that we could put all this behind us. The Hooded Man served a need.

But if The Claw isn’t The Hooded Man, the mystery reopens and the guilt and the horror resume. If The Claw isn’t The Hooded Man, we have to face again what the American military did to prisoners in their custody. If The Claw isn’t The Hooded Man, whose account are we listening to?  

Gilligan was interviewed by CID on January 16, 2004, shortly after the investigations into prisoner abuse began. His unsigned statement was translated and later included in the report issued by the Taguba Commission, the military body formed after abuse charges surfaced to investigate detention and internment operations at Abu Ghraib. The report did not include a statement by Detainee #15716 (Qaissi, a.k.a. The Claw) nor was I able to find one elsewhere. This is Gilligan’s statement as it appears in the report issued by the commission:

TRANSLATION OF STATEMENT PROVIDED BY Abdou Hussain Saad Falah, Detainee #18470, 1610/16 JAN 04:

On the third day, after five o’clock, Mr. Grainer [sic] came and took me to Room #37, which is the shower room, and he started punishing me. Then he brought a box of food and he made me stand on it with no clothing, except a blanket. Then a tall black soldier came and put electrical wires on my fingers and toes and on my penis, and I had a bag over my head. Then he was saying “which switch is on for electricity.” And he came with a loudspeaker and he was shouting near my ear and then he brought the camera and he took some pictures of me, which I knew because of the flash of the camera. And he took the hood off and he was describing some poses he wanted me to do, and I was tired and I fell down. And then Mr. Grainer [sic] came and made me stand up on the stairs and made me carry a box of food. I was so tired and I dropped it. He started screaming at me in English. He made me lift a white chair high in the air. Then the chair came down and then Mr. Joyner took the hood off my head and took me to my room. And I slept after that for about an hour and then I woke up at the headcount time. I couldn’t go to sleep after that because I was very scared.
This statement is an important reminder that there was a person under that hood and that something horrible happened to him. The photograph of Faleh should not be viewed as just some image devoid of context to be taken up by any abused prisoner. It is important to remember that Faleh’s existence continues outside the frame of the photograph. He is a real person.

ILLUSTRATION #60
HOODED MAN 2 (REPEAT OF FIRST)

My staff and I spent a good part of a year trying to find Faleh. He had disappeared without a trace. All that remains is his statement to CID and this photograph of a single, seemingly anonymous hooded figure. The photograph of The Hooded Man has created its own iconography and its own narrative. It has become the iconic image of the Iraq War in the West. But, as Hassan Fattah pointed out to me, “You have to realize that what we in the West think is the iconic image of Abu Ghraib, it’s the man on the box. But, actually in the Arab world, in the Muslim world, the iconic image is actually her smiling next to the dead body.” Hassan Fattah is referring to the photograph of Sabrina Harman smiling and giving the thumbs-up over the body of a dead detainee. It is in not surprising that the Muslim world should have a different iconic photograph of the war in Iraq. Nor is it surprising that the image is an even more potent symbol of abuse and victimization.
Preface

1. I have always considered my brother, who died over twenty years ago, to be the genius in the family. He worked for many years for Project MAC at MIT, and I have read in diverse places on the Internet that he is in part credited with the invention of e-mail.

2. I played the cello; my mother played the piano. I realized how difficult the cello parts were, but I didn’t realize how difficult many of the piano parts were—Beethoven’s Opus 69 or the Rachmaninoff sonata for cello and piano.

Chapter 1: Which Came First, the Chicken or the Egg?

1. Sontag’s unwillingness to include photographs in her book becomes a trouble some conceit. The presence of photographs in her manuscript would force us to ask questions about the photographs themselves. Without photographs Sontag’s theoretical concerns predominate, and we end up thinking about her remarks in a photographic vacuum.

2. Fenton’s entire correspondence from the Crimea, twenty-five letters, is available online at http://rogerfenton.dmu.ac.uk/index.php.

3. The books are located at the Harry Ransom Research Center in Austin, Texas, and at the National Media Museum, Bradford, West Yorkshire, UK.

4. I might add that my interpretation of Baldwin’s and Daniel’s motivations is also psychological theory.
5. Readers may recall the poem but not the events that inspired it. On October 25, 1854, Lord Cardigan led his men into a cul-de-sac where they were surrounded on three sides by Russian artillery. The end result was entirely predictable—carnage.

6. Fenton himself, in his April 4–5 letter, writes about the “valley of death,” although he is clearly referring to the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

7. Early on in my investigations of the photographs, I collected French, English, and Russian maps of the Crimean battlefields. It is endlessly interesting to compare these maps, which provide important clues as to what was significant to each army. I spent my childhood completely obsessed with maps. I owned hundreds of them. The wall of my bedroom was papered with the USGS maps of Long Island, New York.

8. I had tried to convince Julia, my wife, to come with me to the Crimea. My first argument was that it would give her an opportunity not only to read but to see the Twenty-third Psalm. Then I suggested that it was an opportunity to experience the Twenty-third Psalm. And while I didn’t have a chance to make the argument before I went there, it turns out that there are parts of the Valley of the Shadow of Death that are for sale, and there is an opportunity not just to see and experience the Twenty-third Psalm, but to own it. Who could resist? I started to think about the possibility of Valley of the Shadow of Death time shares. What a fantastic place for a nursing home!

9. My trip to the Crimea also dispelled one other concern—the possibility that the photographs had been flopped, left-right. Since the landscape corresponds so closely to the photographs, I feel that’s not very likely.

10. Is it possible that two hundred thousand people “were killed over who should have the right to put a star up over the manger”?


13. Although, to paraphrase Shakespeare, “the fault, dear Brutus, lies not in our photographs but in ourselves.”

14. I was first shown the book by Lydia Davis, a friend of mine from the Putney School. I felt that I was in the presence of a kindred spirit. Klüver was someone clearly obsessed with using empirical methods to determine details about photographs, particularly their sequence.
I had previously contacted Alastair Massie, the director of the National Army Museum in London and the author of several books on the Crimean War. He sent several helpful e-mails. One clarified the size of the cannonballs: “At Sevastopol the guns in use for siege operations were 68, 32, and 24 pounders. This is the weight of shot fired. These heavy guns were mostly ones taken off ships; both sides did this.” A second e-mail discussed the range of the guns: “The heaviest ordnance could fire at a range of up to two miles: this is why the British had to site their camp further than that away from Sevastopol (but by supercharging their guns the Russians could still reach the camp). We have a Crimean War 68 pounder gun sitting outside the Museum and its bore is just over 10 inches, so the diameter of the largest cannonball you can see in the picture will be 10 inches.” The cannonball I borrowed from the Panorama Museum was a 24-pounder. I suppose if I had been utterly scrupulous, I would have tried to lug a 32- and a 68-pounder up to the Valley of the Shadow of Death as well. I have an excuse, however. The 24-pounder was the only cannonball they lent me.

Chapter 2: Will the Real Hooded Man Please Stand Up?

I later had the opportunity to ask Susan Burke about the blanket. She confirmed that she had the blanket. But when I asked the inevitable question, “How do you know it’s the same blanket?” I didn’t get a convincing answer. “Qaisi had said it was the same blanket.” At the risk of boring the reader, there were several additional questions that needed to be answered. How many blankets similar to the one worn by the Hooded Man were at Abu Ghraib? How do you know it was that one? How did you prove Qaisi’s claim that it was the same one?


3. The embedded EXIF files record the data for digital photographs, including the time stamp from the camera, the make and model of the camera, the use of a flash, the f-stop, etc.

4. Lieutenant Colonel Steve L. Jordan, Military Intelligence, was the director of the Joint Interrogation and Debriefing Center at Abu Ghraib. He was the only officer tried in the Abu Ghraib abuse scandal.

5. Cognitive dissonance at its finest. The theory holds that when we embrace one theory, we will firmly reject beliefs that are incompatible with it. It is also known as the Duhem-Quine thesis. Faced with evidence that is incompatible with a theory, we will throw away the evidence, rather than the theory.

6. The interest in the identity of the Hooded Man is not unlike the interest in the identity of the flag-raisers on Mount Suribachi. Two flags were raised, two groups
of soldiers were involved, but public interest was focused on the second flag raising because an iconic photograph was taken of it.

7. Major General Antonio Taguba was appointed on January 31, 2004, to conduct an investigation into the 800th MP Brigade’s detention and internment operation. It was the first major investigation into the Abu Ghraib scandal, but there were imposed limitations as to the scope of the investigation. It was assumed that the problem was within the 800th MP Brigade and with its leaders, particularly Brigadier General Janis Karpinski (since demoted to colonel), and so the investigation was limited to the MPs. The investigation was restricted from looking at the Defense Department and the White House where these policies of abuse originated.

Chapter 3: The Most Curious Thing

1. According to Sabrina Harman, most of the nightshift was present: Harman, Wisdom, Jones, Graner, Frederick, Javal Davis, Cathcart, Hubbard, Megan Ambuhl, Stephens, Goodman and Escalante. I interviewed Sabrina twice on film and numerous times on the telephone.


3. In some cases, OGA sent prisoners for further interrogation to “client-states,” like Jordan. According to Lieutenant Colonel Steve Jordan, “All they were doing was using the Abu Ghraib facility as a holding area. And sometimes they would bring them out there because they would use the linguistic support of the 205th MI Brigade there at the JIDC. And then, if they decided: ‘Hey, we’re not going to keep this person; we’re going to render them out.’ I was aware of at least three or four folks that they rendered out through Amman, Jordan. Now, where they went to, I don’t know, sir . . . I asked somebody, and they said, ‘We’ve got a flight that goes to Amman, Jordan.’ And that flight was the OGA flight, the CIA flight. And that’s how their people came in and out of country that I was aware of, was through facilities over in Amman.”

4. CACI, formerly Consolidated Analysis Center, Incorporated, is a civilian defense contractor that supplied interrogators for Abu Ghraib. Titan is a civilian defense contractor that supplied interpreters.
