

When photographs begin to be evidence in the historical trial

Benjamin is one of the rare philosophers whose writing emerges from the visual. Most of his writings, including those who do not deal directly with visual questions, contain traces of a gaze and of images or objects. However, almost all of Benjamin's texts were published without the images to which Benjamin referred or those quoted in his writing. This is true for earlier as well as for later editions, for journals as well as for books. In other words, most of the visual quotes have been erased. Even the texts Benjamin published during his lifetime, including those that explicitly grew out of visual materials or were directly related to them, usually appeared in a regular textual format without the accompaniment of photos. This, I believe, amounts to a publication of a piece of literary criticism without the quotes from the interpreted text. And in most cases the interpreters are not even aware of the fact that the text in front of them is actually incomplete.

I would like to demonstrate how a reading of Benjamin that does take into account the visual dimension of his texts may look like. I will do this mainly in the context of the essay on the work of art in the age of reproducibility. But let me start first with the relation between text and image.

In some of his essays Benjamin pointed to this separation between text and picture as a clear mechanism of control that should be resisted and overcome. Benjamin never constructed the visual as a separate realm, but weaved it into the textual in a way that obliges his readers—or better: his readers/spectators—to look “for” the visual, to look “at” the visual, “and” then to go back and forth between the visual and the textual.

In the supplement for the XVII thesis of his essay on history Benjamin looked at the locomotive about which Marx had written. Marx “thought” of a train locomotive and saw in it the revolution that plows world history. Benjamin “observed” the train locomotive and his gaze ran into something else: “Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quiet otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train, the human race – to activate the emergency brake”¹. Perhaps there were no emergency handles in train engines in Marx's time, but even if there were, it is doubtful that Marx would have noticed them. In his thinking, Marx rushed from the concrete material reality to the general noun “train” and from there, through the concept, on to the historical

Courtesy of George Eastman House



Eugene Atget *Boulevard Massena* Paris 1912



Eugene Atget *Le 10 de la Rue Mazet* 1925

process. Benjamin reached history as well, but not before pausing on the minute details of the actual experience. It was neither the general noun—a train, or a handle—nor the concept (of the revolution, of world history) but rather the image of a concrete object, the emergency handle, which mediates for him concrete experience and speculative thought. In the framework of this text on history, that has later been recognized as an ontological-epistemological analysis of catastrophe, his gaze laid on an emergency handle, and what he saw in it was its potential to make “the continuum of history explode”².

Examples like this one abound in Benjamin’s oeuvre. Think, for example, about the automaton chess player or the grain of rice on which a whole chapter of the Psalm is written

(both examples are from *The Concept of History*). As time passed, it has become almost impossible to reconstruct accurately in a comprehensive and systematic manner the visual paragraphs that were cut from his writings. One day an editor in a good publishing house might decide to publish a new and improved edition of his complete writings, including postcards, pictures, newspaper cutouts, sketches, documentation of objects and places. In the meantime, it rests upon the contemporary readers to follow the textual traces of this lost visual archive, to retrieve what can be retrieved and to reconstruct the Benjaminian text while paying close attention to the pictures which left their mark in it. These pictures speak from within the texts — though not verbally— and they are numerous.

The photograph as an object, a piece of material, can change hands and be preserved by the first tradition. But no tradition can appropriate the photographed image. The photographic image can only be transmitted. In Benjamin's discussion of the camera in the *Passages Work*, he refers to it as a producer of pictures that, with each shot, produces another unique picture. This is not the picture that portrays a man and a machine, but an image that results from their encounter, or in Benjamin's own words: "What makes

the first photographs uniquely one of their kind is perhaps this: they are the first image from the encounter between man and machine"³. It's not the "first" encounter between man and machine that is important, but the fact that these are the first images to be produced by such an encounter. Such an image presents the encounter neither from the perspective of the photographer nor from that of the photographed person; it is an image obtained from the encounter itself. Since the encounter usually brings together not only a person and a machine, also a photographing and a photographed person, and these two are then joined by a third, the spectator, we may conclude by saying that the image of the encounter can never be fully appropriated by any of the partners; it always lies in between and is shared among them. This is where transmission can start.

In the essay on the Work of Art Benjamin discusses the work of the French photographer of Eugene Atget: around 1900, "Atget... took photographs of deserted Paris streets. It has justly been said that he photographed them like scenes of crimes. A crime scene, too, is deserted; it is photographed for the purpose of establishing evidence. With Atget, photographic records begin to be evidence in the historical trial"⁴.

All the nine published editions of Benjamin's text which I know include no visual reference to Atget. In the meantime, those few lines which Benjamin wrote on Atget became noto-

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rious and almost everybody repeats blindly the statement that Atget depicted empty Paris as a scene of crime. The corpus of Atget consists mainly of thousands images of deserted Paris, and many of them, hazardously chosen, became an abstract visual synonym for that phrase “scene of crime”. What is exactly the scene of crime depicted by Atget’s camera? Referred to by Benjamin? What is the crime that these photos bear testimony to? I don’t know which of Atget’s images Benjamin saw or remembered when he was writing these lines. But following the last part of his text on Atget — talking about these photos as evidence in a trial— I think we can’t limit ourselves to the main corpus of Atget’s photos. At its margins some records for a historical trial can be found indeed.

Among the thousands of photographs of the city there are a few frames in which figures appear. These evidential photos candidly show city dwellers who were banned from it, and whose banishment should be considered as what rendered the city’s streets into a crime scene: prostitutes, tramps and vagabonds. In two photos from the beginning of the 20’s where “public girls” appear, they are not shown in the street itself but on its margin, at the doors of certain houses. Their bodies, on which new urban regulations were written at the time, were removed from the city’s public spaces, but could not be hidden completely behind the building walls. The women are standing on the doorstep of the house they belong to —their home? The brothel?— but slide a bit out of it. One woman is standing on the doorstep, leaning forward a bit; the other is sitting on a chair at the entrance to the house, her elbow is slightly inserted through the opening —or so it seems, due to the

angle of photography chosen by Atget— perhaps to leave an opening for negotiation with the policeman or the supervisor who will come to arrest her for showing herself in public.

Benjamin was the master of many drafts, and fragments of his ideas are reiterated, but always with slight variations in the many versions of each text. I have chosen to read these photographs by Atget with the help of a certain passage from the Passages Work. It is a fragment of a text he copied from the new regulations of prostitution in Paris written in the 19th century. According to these regulations, prostitutes should have been removed from the streets of Paris, shoved behind doors and locks, thus cleansing the public domain of their provocative presence. These regulations imposed on “the public girls” (*filles publiques*) constraints and restrictions related to their freedom of movement and speech. Policemen were given the authority to expel women who walked alone publicly from the street of the city, to stamp them with the shaming sign ‘whore’ and to ban them.⁵ Going back and forth between the regulations copied into Benjamin’s text and the images in Atget’s corpus, between Benjamin’s description of Atget’s photographs and the photographs themselves, one may gain this different understanding of the scene of crime Benjamin might have had in mind. Viewing the photographs of women, one may even declare, together with Benjamin “a state of sexual emergency” and look for the emergency brake. Finally, one may ask whether it is not the case that banning prostitution by police regulations is not a case of blurring the distinction between law preserving and law instituting violence on which Benjamin

wrote in his “Critic of violence”, and whether the elimination of the prostitutes from the public sphere, the act that renders them almost invisible is not reminiscent of other acts of violence in which people suddenly disappear as a result of sovereign intervention. ❧

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NOTE AND REFERENCES

1 BENJAMIN, W. *Selected Writings: Volume 4: 1938-1940*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 402

2 Ibidem p. 395

3 BENJAMIN, W. *Passages: Paris – Capitale du XIXeme Siècle*, Les Editions du CERF, 1989, p. 692

4 BENJAMIN, W. *Selected Writings: Volume 4: 1938-1940*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 258

5 In 1804, when Napoleon published his book of laws (*Code Napoléon*), women were actually banned. Married women were not allowed to go out and work or to study without the permission of their husbands. Prostitution was regulated but did not contaminate the law. See also (Roberts, Nickie, 1992. *Whores in History*, Harper Collins Publishers) and my article on the status of women regarding the *Declaration of human and civil rights* (forthcoming, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Zone Books).

THESE REGULATIONS IMPOSED ON “THE PUBLIC GIRLS” (FILLES PUBLIQUES) CONSTRAINTS AND RESTRICTIONS RELATED TO THEIR FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT AND SPEECH.