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Photography as a "Space of Experience": On the Retrospective Legibility of Historic Photographs

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I.

The historian and theorist Reinhart Koselleck opens his investigation of the semantics of historical eras with a description of the artist Albrecht Altdorfer's oil painting *Battle of Alexander at Issus* (*Alexanderschlacht;* 1529), in which he pays particular attention to the strangely anachronistic nature of the scene: in Altdorfer's depiction of this decisive battle in 333 BCE, the Macedonians and Persians are in the battle dress of his own time (fig. 1). "Viewing the painting in the Pinakothek," Koselleck writes, "we think we see before us the last knights of Maximilian or the serf-army at the Battle of Pavia. From their feet to their turbans, most of the Persians resemble the Turks who, in the same year the picture was painted (1529), unsuccessfully laid siege to Vienna. In other words, the event that Altdorfer captured was for him at once historical and contemporary."[1] Koselleck interprets this as a reflection of the fact that in Altdorfer's mind, the battle fought in 333 BCE was not actually a thing of the past, not some distant moment in history, but a supratemporal event in which he could recognize his own time and which would be similarly decipherable in the future. "The *Alexanderschlacht* was timeless as the prelude, figure, or archetype of the final struggle between Christ and Antichrist; those participating in it were contemporaries of those who lived in expectation of the Last Judgment."[2]

This attitude toward time would radically change in the centuries to come. The poet and philosopher Friedrich Schlegel, who commented on Altdorfer's painting three hundred years after it was made, saw this scene primarily as a depiction of the past glory of the age of chivalry. Koselleck notes that "[Schlegel] had thus gained a critical-historical distance with respect to Altdorfer's masterpiece. Schlegel was able to distinguish the painting from his own time, as well as from that of the Antiquity it strove to represent."[3] The year 333 BCE, when that historic battle took place; the year 1529, when Altdorfer portrayed it in his painting; and Schlegel's own time had become three distinct epochs that were no longer connected or synchronized by a shared temporal horizon. From this, Koselleck deduces that between 1500 and 1800 a temporalization of history had occurred. Whereas Altdorfer saw the past and his own present as related, transposable phenomena, around 1800 a growing awareness

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Fig. 1. Albrecht Altdorfer (ca. 1480–1538). *Battle of Alexander at Issus,* 1529, oil on wood, 158.4 × 120.3 cm (62⅜ × 47⅜ in.). Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek. © bpk / Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen

of their fundamental difference and temporal distance emerged. Koselleck continues, "Formulated schematically, there was for Schlegel, in the three hundred years separating him from Altdorfer, more time (or perhaps a different mode of time) than appeared to have passed for Altdorfer in the eighteen hundred years or so that lay between the Battle of Issus and his painting."[4] This new sense of different temporal horizons saw the "space of experience" and the "horizon of expectation" draw apart. Koselleck's thesis is "that during *Neuzeit* the difference between experience and expectation has increasingly expanded; more precisely, that *Neuzeit* [literally "new time," the period since ca. 1500] is first understood as a *neue Zeit* from the time that expectations have distanced themselves evermore from all previous experience."[5]

II.

If we accept Koselleck's analysis, then it goes without saying that this changed sense of time could not fail to have had an impact on the pictorial representation of history. The consternation that met Benjamin West's painting *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770) is well documented. The expectation had been that James Wolfe, the victorious British general who was fatally wounded on the battlefield fighting the French in Quebec in 1759, would be portrayed—in the traditional manner—in timeless, that is to say, classical dress. Particularly since the battle had taken place just a decade earlier, it would have been considered all the more appropriate to idealize and detemporalize the subject matter, in order to imbue the event with a supratemporal significance. West's refusal to conform to this convention arose from his different understanding of what a history painting should be and his conviction that the truth and propriety of the painting would be achieved not by rendering the subject matter timeless but, on the contrary, by temporalizing it. West says, "It is a topic that history will proudly record, and the same truth that guides the pen of the historian should govern the pencil of the artist. . . . The only reason for adopting the Greek and Roman dresses, is the picturesque forms of which their drapery is susceptible; but is this an advantage for which all the truth and propriety of the subject should be sacrificed?"[6]

Hegel, in his *Aesthetics* (1818–29), clearly lays out the effect that the principle of the temporalization of history had had on the arts:

> Poets, painters, sculptors, composers choose materials above all from past times whose civilization, morals, usages, constitution, and religion are different from the whole civilization contemporary with themselves. . . . Now of course the artist is quite at home with the universal "pathos," human and divine, but the variously conditioning external form of the ancient period itself, the characters and actions of which he presents, has changed essentially and become foreign to him.[7]

The "external form" of past times is no longer available for posterity to adapt as it likes; it has now become an alien entity. Instead of one time absorbing another, things "clash":

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> Now, given this clash between different ages, the question arises of how a work of art has to be framed in respect of the external aspects of locality, customs, usages, religious, political, social, moral conditions: namely whether the artist should forget his own time and keep his eye only on the past and its actual existence, so that his work is a true picture of what has gone; or whether he is not only entitled but in duty bound to take account solely of his own nation and contemporaries, and fashion his work according to ideas which coincide with the particular circumstances of his own time. These opposite requirements may be put in this way: the material should be handled either objectively, appropriately to its content and its period, or subjectively, i.e. assimilated entirely to the custom and culture of the present. To cling to either of these in their opposition leads to an equally false extreme.[8]

Regardless of whether the artist decides to pursue one of these false extremes or a synthesis of the objective and the subjective, the basis of his work has to be an awareness of the fundamental differentness and alienness of the past compared to his own time. The consequence of this for history painting is that striving for a historically accurate depiction, the most faithful reconstruction of clothing, fashions, and architecture, will not bring the past any closer; on the contrary, it will make it all the more apparent that the past is over and done with. As Peter Schneemann has argued, "The countless details of the historical context, the concreteness of the costumes, connect the scene with its historical placing. The more precisely a unique moment is described, the less legitimate it appears."[9] In other words, the very effort to draw the past into the present underlines the distance that separates our own time from historical time. The more accurate and faithful the depiction of the "external form of the ancient period," in Hegel's phrase, the more aware the viewer will be of its historical singularity and unrepeatability. Reappropriation and alterity, presence and distance, impinge on each other.

III.

In his description of the "space of experience," Koselleck quotes a visual metaphor devised by his fellow historian Christian Meier:

> It makes sense to say that experience based on the past is spatial since it is assembled into a totality, within which many layers of earlier times are simultaneously present, without, however, providing any indication of the before and after. There is no experience that might be chronologically calibrated—though datable by occasion, of course, since at any one time it is composed of what can be recalled by one's memory and by the knowledge of others' lives. Chronologically, all experience leaps over time; experience does not create continuity in the sense of an additive preparation of the past. To borrow an image from Christian Meier, it is like the glass front of a washing machine, behind which various bits of the wash appear now and then, but are all contained within the drum.[10]

Historians have often used visual metaphors to illustrate the segmented, fragmented nature of historical accounts. In *The Historian's Craft,* Marc Bloch compares the work of the historian to the reconstruction of a faded film: "But in the film which the historian is examining, only the last picture remains quite clear. In order to reconstruct the faded features of the others, it behooves him first to unwind the spool in the opposite direction from that in which the pictures were taken."[11] On closer examination, Bloch's metaphor conveys a distinctly optimistic notion of the possibility of detecting and reconstructing the past. The assumption here is that there is in fact a continuous, uninterrupted sequence of images and events. Although the historian, living in his own time, sees only "the last picture" in the sequence, it is connected to all the previous pictures in history (however faded), and the implication here is that the spool of the projector can be unwound right back to the origins of those events. Koselleck's (and Meier's) historiographic washing machine does not imply a similar continuity. Looking in through the glass front, it is possible to make out shifting combinations of historical strata, depending on what one's experience picks out and focuses on, while other events and connections remain hidden and disappear into the reservoir of historical data. Instead of a continuous narrative reaching far back into time, the historian sees only the momentarily immobilized image. Koselleck would not have chosen a continuously advancing film as a metaphor for the historian's materials; if anything, he might have preferred a photograph: an immobilized segment of the past, constructed from countless details. In what follows here, however, the main emphasis is less on photography as a metaphor than on the way that the invention of photography has changed the historical "space of experience."

As a static testimony to a long-past world, almost every photograph is a document of a survival.[12] It captures a particular moment, isolates it from its original circumstances, and offers it to posterity as a detached snapshot. No one has described this temporal structure of photography as clearly as the Weimar-era writer and theorist Siegfried Kracauer. Kracauer takes as his example a historic photograph of a young woman of twenty-four, posing in a tightly corseted dress in a court photographer's studio in 1864. What interests Kracauer here is the interpenetration of three temporal horizons: first, the time pictured in the photograph, namely, that long-gone day in a court photographer's studio; second, the temporality of the picture itself, in other words, the segment that the photograph has detached from the flow of events and has halted forever; and third, the time of the photograph's observation, the here and now in which the viewer's gaze lands on the old photograph. During the contemplation of the historical shot, these three horizons drift apart. The photograph from 1864 is a fragment from a past that has no connection to the now. Kracauer describes how every photograph "must be essentially associated with the moment in time at which it came into existence."[13] The old photograph does not point to any other time. Resolutely, it always shows that same, isolated moment in the past and gives no hint of what happened before or after this shot was taken. The historical photograph has no historical environs. The young

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woman pictured in 1864, who would later become a grandmother, "smiles continuously, always the same smile. The smile is arrested yet no longer refers to the life from which it has been taken."[14]

In Kracauer's description of this temporal structure, a decisive part is played by the clothing of the young woman, since this is an immediately obvious indicator of the passage of time. The depiction of clothing reintroduces a motif into the theory of photography that had also already had a crucial role in history painting. In his discussion of the viability of representing history, Hegel made particular mention of the depiction of its "external aspects," which, as the controversy surrounding West's portrayal of *The Death of General Wolfe* showed, also importantly included clothing. Similarly, Koselleck's interpretation of Altdorfer's *Battle of Alexander at Issus* takes the unifying clothing of the protagonists as an indicator of the fact that at the time of the painting the "space of experience" was not entirely distinct from the "horizon of expectation." In photography—leaving aside deliberately staged photographs—the style of clothing almost automatically indicates the period in history when the picture was taken. "Photography is bound to time," writes Kracauer, "in precisely the same way as fashion."[15] Whereas the style of clothing of one's own time is not perceived as historical and, as such, is, so to speak, transparent—laced bodices, top hats, platform shoes, and the like stand out only in retrospect—clothing from a past era can look odd and outlandish. From a present-day perspective, the young woman in the old photograph looks to Kracauer like "an archaeological mannequin which serves to illustrate the costumes of the period."[16] However, with this reference to "illustration," Kracauer is specifically not suggesting that the photograph is keeping the young woman in her period costume alive for all time. What the photograph illustrates is not a past age, but the fact that it is past. As time marches on, the photographed period costume in the picture is left ever further behind: "The photograph captures only the residuum that history has discharged."[17] This air of being in costume and of having been "discharged" applies not only to the subject and her clothing but to all the items in the picture. In Kracauer's view, everything shown in an old photograph is period costume: "This is how the elements crumble, since they are not held together. The photographic archive assembles in effigy the last elements of a nature alienated from meaning."[18]

With the reference to "meaning," Kracauer is also alluding to the difference between memory and a photographic archive. Unlike the camera, which registers everything it is exposed to with an equal lack of interest, the memory seeks out meaning. It selects, favors particular memories at the expense of others, and combines what it retains to create a sketchy but intentional story. Photography, by contrast, does not capture a motif with regard to its possible meaning, but rather extracts it from history as a remnant, a fragment, as detritus:

> The photograph gathers fragments around a nothing. When the grandmother stood in front of the lens, she was present for one second in the spatial continuum that presented itself to the lens. But it was this aspect and not the

> grandmother that was eternalized. A shudder runs through the viewer of old photographs. For they make visible not the knowledge of the original but the spatial configuration of a moment: what appears in the photograph is not the person but the sum of what can be subtracted from him or her. The photograph annihilates the person by portraying him or her, and were person and portrayal to converge, the person would cease to exist.[19]

In this passage Kracauer reiterates the extent to which the particular temporality of photography is tied to the process of taking a picture. At the moment when the shot is taken, the photograph removes the subject from time. The things that enter the picture when the shutter opens do not survive there. The picture does not breathe eternal life into its subject matter; it merely confirms its isolation. Thus the contemplation of a photograph does not take the viewer back to the subject, to "knowledge of the original," but rather shows, as Kracauer puts it, "the sum of what can be subtracted" from the subject. At the moment a photograph is taken, life detaches itself and is only later identifiable as a residuum.

However, this act of photographic annihilation is only one aspect of the process, since the photograph also simultaneously confirms that the subject did in fact exist for that short moment in the photographer's studio. The young woman "was present for one second in the spatial continuum that presented itself to the lens." Anticipating Roland Barthes, Kracauer makes a connection between knowledge of the unrepeatability of the depicted scene and the simultaneous act of photographic confirmation. "The photograph becomes a ghost because the costumed mannequin was once alive. The image proves that the alien trappings were incorporated into life as accessories."[20] The photograph both draws out and denies the past. And Kracauer is referring to the same conflict when he writes that photography "encompasses orders of existence that have shriveled without wanting to admit it."[21]

Kracauer was the first person to see illustration and annihilation, endurance and disappearance, as simultaneous components in a photograph. It is also from this idea that he derives the memorable metaphors in his text. Whereas the film theorist André Bazin regards the photographic objectivity of time as being ensured by the fact that photography preserves objects, like "the bodies of insects are preserved intact, out of the distant past, in amber,"[22] Kracauer's metaphors are very much at odds with this notion of intactness: his focus is not on hidden, unscathed creatures but on a costumed mannequin, a corpse, a ghost—all of which are both true to life yet lifeless.

However, in Kracauer's view, the temporal incongruence of photography is not a deficiency; on the contrary, it provides an epistemological opportunity that had never before played a part in the history of images. Photography seems predestined, as he puts it, to create a "*general inventory* of a nature that cannot be further reduced—as the comprehensive catalogue of all manifestations which present themselves in space."[23] Kracauer evidently wants to highlight an epistemological potential in photography that is rooted in its nature as a means of capturing images. Whereas time is constantly

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advancing, creating new phenomena and casting others off, things in a photographically produced image linger on, like sloughed skins or "cocoons," as he later says. And the special potential of photography is its capacity to give visual form to phenomena from the past by permanently archiving them in pictures:

> A consciousness caught up in nature is unable to see its own material base. It is the task of photography to disclose this previously unexamined *foundation of nature*. For the first time in history, photography brings to light the entire natural cocoon; for the first time, the inert world presents itself in its independence from human beings. . . . The photographic archive assembles in effigy the last elements of a nature alienated from meaning.[24]

The introduction of "nature" at this point comes as something of a surprise. And it is certainly debatable whether the effigies of things, preserved in the photographic archive, can really be described as "natural" or whether they are not in fact culturally mediated. However, in the present context, Kracauer's ontological allusions are of less interest than his reference to the temporal structure of photography, which casts a useful light on Koselleck's distinction between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation with regard to its applicability to the photographic image. Photography—as a general inventory, an archive, and a comprehensive catalog—constitutes a visual space of experience in which the past is stored as a cocoon. The photographic image retains that which has detached itself from human consciousness and has survived it—the "residuum that history has discharged." Kracauer, as Gertrud Koch has put it, regards photography as a "reservoir of reference objects."[25] This reservoir contains things that escape our consciousness and are largely impervious to human influence. For almost every photograph—as the photography pioneer William Henry Fox Talbot had already recognized in the 1840s—captures multiple details that the photographer had not consciously registered.[26] And it is precisely this preservation of historical detritus that accounts for Kracauer's particular interest in photography as a space of experience.

This experience can rarely be anticipated. Time first has to pass for the fashions in the picture to appear outmoded and for the young woman to have turned into an archaeological mannequin. However, with regard to Koselleck's second category, the horizon of expectation, in the case of the photographically immobilized image, the horizon emerges only with hindsight. Only posterity can discover what is historic about a photograph and what, at the moment when it was taken, would not have raised any expectations for the future.

IV.

Finally, let us turn our attention to a historic photograph taken in 1914 (fig. 2). At the front of the huge crowd that has gathered outside the Theatinerkirche at the Odeonsplatz in Munich, some faces stand out very clearly. A boy has climbed up onto the plinth of the lion sculpture outside the Feldherrnhalle to get a better view of the

Fig. 2. Heinrich Hoffmann (German, 1885–1957). *Odeonsplatz,* Munich, 2 August 1914. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, Bildarchiv

Fig. 3. Heinrich Hoffmann (German, 1885–1957). *Odeonsplatz,* Munich, 2 August 1914, reprinted by Hoffmann in 1932 with white circle and inset enlargement indicating Adolf Hitler. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, Bildarchiv

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scene in the square. A bald man to his right is waving his hat in the air. This picture documents a rally, held on 2 August 1914, to celebrate the mobilization of German troops. The crowds had come to Odeonsplatz to demonstrate their support for the war, which they underlined by singing patriotic songs like "Die Wacht am Rhein." A white circle imposed on the image later picks out one individual from the crowd— a twenty-five-year-old man who lives at Schleißheimer Straße 34, paints oil paintings, and will enter the history books nineteen years later as Reichskanzler Adolf Hitler (fig. 3). This shot was first published in 1932 in the magazine *Illustrierter Beobachter*, with the circular mark identifying Hitler. Within a few years, the same image was being used on cigarette cards and had been published in numerous magazines at home and abroad. The author of this photograph was Heinrich Hoffmann, Party Member no. 59 and Hitler's personal photographer since the early days of the National Socialist movement. In 1938 he was appointed to a professorship, selected the images for the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung* (Great German art exhibition), and built up his photo agency until it had a monopoly on National Socialist photo-propaganda.

However, all that happened only after the picture had been taken in August 1914. Evidently, a comment from Hitler had prompted the photographer to reexamine this historic picture to see if he could see any sign of Hitler in the crowd. As Hoffmann writes in his memoir, "I went into the darkroom and put one of the plates from August 2, 1914 in the enlarger. In huge suspense I searched the tens of thousands of faces for one that might be Hitler's."[27] Thus, in 1932, Hoffmann's picture had become something that it was not when it was taken: a picture of the future Reichskanzler, a historic document of his immediate support for the First World War. This photograph shows Hitler at a time when he was not yet a figure in history. The unknown, nameless man in the picture is simply an extra in the anonymous crowd and in no way distinguishable from all the other nameless extras in the picture, who have since vanished from the annals of world history. It would be possible to try to reconstruct the life stories of those anonymous individuals, but one would not be likely to get very far. Hitler, by contrast, has left an indelible mark on history, making it impossible to retrospectively see this picture for what it was at the moment when it was taken—a chance image with no definable future. The viewer will always see the future figure of the dictator in the unknown man in the crowd. Two time regimes converge here: the photographically arrested moment in 1914 with no discernible future and the retrospective view of the photograph that denies its nonfuture and imposes a "false" historical recognizability on it.

The Hitler-free image of 2 August 1914 has become so unimaginable that whenever and wherever this shot is published today, an enlargement of the relevant section is always included with it, to make it easier to read. The white circle around Hitler's face retrospectively creates an impression of historical order, although at the same time it has also made the original contingency of the image illegible. The white circle puts everything in its place. It divides the picture into major factors and minor factors, into important and unimportant, a main figure and minor figures, and Hitler

becomes what he was not at the moment when the shutter opened. As Kracauer writes in another context, "Now the image wanders ghost-like through the present, like the lady of the haunted castle."[28]

The photographic "space of experience" radicalizes the tendency to temporalization that Koselleck saw as a characteristic of *Neuzeit.* It was only temporalization that turned the past into a closed chapter in time. And this closure in fact corresponds to the temporality in a photographic image: the photograph continuously produces something that is of the past. In the early nineteenth century, the pioneers of the new medium could not yet fully experience this phenomenon. They knew only pictures of their own intact world. However, by the time of the second generation of photographers, there was already an archive of images that presented viewers with glimpses of a forgotten world. This visual space of experience does not re-create the past; on the contrary, it is the visible proof that the past is no more. The photograph taken in August 1914 is an extreme example of this experience of time: the future, which the retrospective view of this picture always also sees, was not to be expected at the moment when it was taken.

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Notes This essay was translated from the German by Fiona Elliott, who has also translated quotations from German sources unless otherwise noted.

1. Reinhart Koselleck, "Modernity and the Planes of Historicity," in idem, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time,* trans. and with an introduction by Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 9–10; first published in German as *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979).
2. Koselleck, "Modernity," 11.
3. Koselleck, "Modernity," 10.
4. Koselleck, "Modernity," 10.
5. Reinhart Koselleck, "'Space of Experience' and 'Horizon of Expectation': Two Historical Categories," in idem, *Futures Past* (see note 1), 263.
6. John Galt, *The Life, Studies, and Works of Benjamin West, Esq.* (London: Cadell & Davies, 1820), 48–49.
7. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art,* vol. 1, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 264.
8. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 265.
9. Peter Schneemann, *Geschichte als Vorbild: Die Modelle der französischen Historienmalerei 1747–1789* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1994), 41.
10. Koselleck, "Space of Experience," 260.
11. Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft,* trans. Peter Putnam (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 38–39.
12. This of course has only a limited relevance to art photography, which is, however, not the focus of what follows here.
13. Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," in idem, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays,* trans., ed., and with an introduction by Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 54; first published as "Die Photographie," in idem, *Das Ornament der Masse* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1963).

14. Kracauer, "Photography," 48.

15. Kracauer, "Photography," 55.

16. Kracauer, "Photography," 48.

17. Kracauer, "Photography," 55.

18. Kracauer, "Photography," 62.

19. Kracauer, "Photography," 56–57.

20. Kracauer, "Photography," 56.

21. Kracauer, "Photography," 55.

22. André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," trans. Hugh Gray, *Film Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (1960): 8.

23. Kracauer, "Photography," 61.

24. Kracauer, "Photography," 61–62.

25. Gertrud Koch, *Siegfried Kracauer zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius Verlag, 1996), 130.

26. The classic passage by Talbot reads: "It frequently happens . . .—and this is one of the charms of photography—that the operator himself discovers on examination, perhaps long afterwards, that he has depicted many things he had no notion of at the time. Sometimes inscriptions and dates are found upon the buildings, or printed placards most irrelevant, are discovered upon their walls: sometimes a distant dial-plate is seen, and upon it—unconsciously recorded—the hour of the day at which the view was taken." William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1968), unpaginated.

27. Quoted in Joe J. Heydecker, ed., *Das Hitler-Bild. Die Erinnerungen des Fotografen Heinrich Hoffmann* (St. Pölten/Salzburg: Residenz, 2008), 50.

28. Kracauer, "Photography," 56.