Pictures of the Past: Benjamin and Barthes on photography and history

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Abstract

This paper explores the key moments in Benjamin's and Barthes's analyses of the cultural significance of the photograph. For Benjamin these are; the optical unconscious, the transmission of aura, the representation of cultural and political decay and proto-surrealist political commentary. For Barthes they are; the techniques of the photographer, the studium, the punctum and the ecstasy of the image. These rather different approaches to photography reveal a common concern with history. Both authors have written about the nature of historical understanding and photography has provided both with a powerful metaphor. What emerges from their analyses of photographs is that each evokes a double moment of historical awareness; of being both in the present and in the past. For Benjamin this is the 'spark of contingency' with which the aura of past existence shines in the present. For Barthes it is the 'ça-a-été', the emotional stab of awareness that what is present and visible in the photograph is irretrievably lost in the past.

Keywords - Walter Benjamin; Roland Barthes; Photography; History

Introduction

The content of every photograph is history. It shows the moment of the image's origin that is always in the past to the moment in which it is viewed. Even the instantaneity of the polaroid photograph captures a scene or event that can have transformed beyond recognition before the image is developed. However contrived, however still the scene, a photograph offers us a glimpse of actions and events that have already occurred and which, usually, are finished. The photographic image, unlike the filmic image, does not easily show the passage of time but it does show us that time has passed.[2] Indeed, the limitation of the still photograph as a reflection of our world is that it is always a freezing of a moment in the past. But its power is in reflecting that moment from the real past rather than drawing us into the different present of a diegesis[3], of the unfolding narrative flow of events that we find in any kind of performance in film or theatre. What photographs do is to bring the past into the present, confronting us with the passage of time and the stillness of that which has gone.

The cultural critics Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes were both fascinated by photography, not as photographers or through any technical interest, but because of the potency of the photographic image. Both also wrote about a range of other cultural media - texts, theatre, advertising, painting, film, toys - and both were intensely aware of the historicity of culture. Their perspective on history was somewhat different, as we shall explore in this paper, but both address photography as a means of communication that emerged from the margins of culture at the end of the last century to move rapidly to transform the character of artistic representation and human perception. For both, the representational possibilities and mass proliferation of photographic images become key features of modern culture.

Benjamin's enigmatic 1931 essay '*A Small History of Photography*' (1985a: 240-257 - hereafter cited as SHP) traces the history of the production of photographic images and reflects upon their cultural impact. It brings together some ideas that had been gathered as part of his **Arcades Project**[4] and that crop up in a number of his other writings.[5] As he comments on the evolving relationship between photography and the spheres of science, art, business and history, his analytical focus is upon the question of how the photograph communicates; how does it speak to those who view it? The photograph offers a model of Benjamin's own work on the city culture of modernity that Gilloch (1996: 169) identifies as "physiognomical"; it attends to the surface of the world, reproducing minutae and encouraging detailed scrutiny,

provoking its viewer to engage with the complexity that is apparent beneath the sudden illumination of the image.

Barthes's early writing on photography also responded to the compulsion to read images circulating in the culture. His interest was not primarly in the photography but how images communicate within a cultural space.[6] For Barthes, the photograph is able to present us with the social and material world through its power to convince us that, whatever else the image evokes, there is a simple correspondence to a reality in the past, "an awareness of its *having-been-there*" (Barthes 1977c: 44). In his 1980 essay **Camera Lucida** (1993 - hereafter cited as CL), Barthes disconnects the photographic image from its context by addressing the images in a more direct way. As he develops a conceptual vocabulary to make sense of his responses, it becomes clear that they can only really be understood in relation to history; specifically his own biography and that of the people in the images. In **Camera Lucida** the theme of historical moments that declare "that-has-been" (*ça-a-été* - CL: 115) returns as the compelling feature of the photographs Barthes considers.

There is a considerable secondary literature on Benjamin's and Barthes's comments on photography (including Price 1994; Cadaver 1997 and a number of interesting contributions to Rabaté 1997) some of which discusses them both. Rather than review this secondary literature in this paper we aim to bring a new dimension to the discussion, firstly by drawing out the importance of history to the way they approach photographs and secondly by comparing them directly. Benjamin and Barthes are both very much in the past of cultural studies, as are the photographs they study. But as time passes, their unique perspective on the emergence of new cultural forms such as photography still has much to tell us about what has become so prevalent and common place in contemporary culture. They do not explore the variability of the audience and so do not give gendered readings or expose the limitations of the 'male gaze' (Mulvey 1989), but what they do is to try to understand how photographs work as pictures of the past.

The photograph as a moment of history

Neither Benjamin nor Barthes come up with a definitive analysis of the cultural role of photography but they give us glimpses its extraordinary power to capture a number of aspects of the social world. What we wish to argue in this paper is that both Benjamin and Barthes find in photography a medium that allows them to explore ideas of history central to the cultural critique that they engaged in. Both were entranced by the enigma of the photograph bringing back the past in a routine and

repeatable way, accessible to almost anyone with eyes to see. The object of the photograph does not stand for its function and then for its culture as an ancient tool or artefact found by an archaeologist does. It does not require linguistic understanding or translation as any textual document does. The historic force of a photograph is in the way it mediates a world gone by, graspable at first glance as if through a window directly onto the past requiring nothing to be added by the art of a producer or interpreter.

The most obvious way of treating the photograph is as a document of reality, one that accurately captures the physical presence of people, buildings, objects and nature. The scene we glimpse with our eyes fades in memory, some aspects of it remaining longer than others, but the view caught in the photographic image is complete and enduring. This is the powerful distanciation in time that the photograph affords. Memory is at best incomplete and unreliable but even the earliest photographs, including Niepce's 1826, 'View from a Window at Gras' and many daguerreotypes from the first half of the 19th century, are still available for scrutiny and reproduction. One small movement of a finger can freeze time, making it available for later viewing, perhaps for infinity.

For Benjamin this property of capturing time helps shape modernity:

> **Of the countless movements of switching, inserting, pressing and the like, the 'snapping' of the photographer has had the greatest consequences. A touch of the finger now sufficed to fix an event for an unlimited period of time. The camera gave the moment a posthumous shock, as it were.**
>
> **(Benjamin 1992a [1939]: 171)**

Barthes's response to the shock capacity of the photograph is the inverse; the moment may be shocked into the future, but in the future it will fail to shock us. Commenting on an exhibition of 'Shock-Photos' which include apparently shocking images - for example, of a crowd of soldiers beside a field of skulls - he comments that:

> **…none of the photographs…touches us… because, as we look at them, we are in each case dispossessed of our judgement: someone has shuddered for us, reflected for us, judged for us….. for us they have no history …**
>
> **(Barthes 1979: 71-71)**

The taking and display of the photographic image achieves a moral judgement, more evidenced and less equivocal than could be sustained before the technological modernity ushered in by photography.

Both of these elliptical commentators on culture are interested in how photography brings a new dimension to history and historicity. For Benjamin the photograph has a potential to open up history, allowing us to see the past, to see something of what the 'Angelus Novus' is staring at, as he is blown backwards into the future. As he says in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*: "The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognised and is never seen again" (Benjamin 1979b: 247) - this he calls the 'dialectical image'. But the photograph offers an image of the past that has been arrested so that it *can* be seen again and again - Benjamin calls this 'dialectics at a standstill'.[7] The metaphor of the 'dialectical image' as a point at which the present and the past meet is characteristic of Benjamin's method of understanding culture as history:

> **… image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. - Only dialectical images are genuine images…**
>
> **(Benjamin 1999: 462)**

The dialectical image has to be read; it does not speak for itself and its purely temporal link to the past must be turned into language which brings the image into the present. This is the work of the critic who unravels the dialectic. History for Benjamin serves a more important purpose than simply gathering evidence to establish order, sequence and cause because it is through reflection on the past that we can engage with a process of redemption that may lead to happiness. Through sharing these reflections with others - and this is the point of writing - the critic can contribute towards the collective redemption of humanity. The work of history is to gather and connect the fullness of human experience, to recognise details that at the time seemed minor or trivial. This is not a disinterested activity and Benjamin refers to the edge that historical materialism gives to engaging critically with the past; present danger leads to a new way of seeing past events and each generation that reflects must resist the tendency of the ruling class towards conformism. Of course for Benjamin the threat was Fascism and the conformism to be resisted was the

belief in technological progress. The past can only be understood through the lens of the present but then the present cannot be comprehended without remembering the past. Benjamin uses the properties of the camera as a metaphor for the way that the past asserts its orderliness on the unfolding of history: "The initial day of a calendar serves as a historical time-lapse camera" (Benjamin 1992b: 253). As Konersmann puts it "The metaphor of the photographic snapshot encapsulates and illustrates several of those attributes which characterise the conditions and modes of this historiography…." (1991: 73-4).

Barthes similarly rejects the modern view of history as a sequence of causally connected events, objectively representing reality, and argues that "… historical discourse does not follow reality, it only signifies it; it asserts at every moment: *this happened*, but the meaning conveyed is only that someone is making that assertion" (Barthes 1970: 154). But unlike Benjamin, Barthes's approach to history pays more attention to the lifespan and experience of people rather than the *durée* of epochs. He is suspicious of the capacity of the photograph to reveal the past to us but explores how we engage with it through some form of recognition. It is only through the use of *judgement*, of some identification with the past in the image, that it truly speaks to us - but the image cannot achieve this on its own. His history of **Michelet** (Barthes 1987) includes all the images of the great historian that he could find - drawings, paintings, lithographs and photographs. But, it is only the conjunction of elements - images, bibilographic details, the historical facts, the testimonies and the quotations - which evokes the emotional tone of Michelet and his reactions to the world. The photographic images fix the corporeal man at chronological moments; they situate him in the history, subject him to the historical processes on which he himself is a master commentator. The photograph is a device Barthes uses to turn the light of history on the consumate historiographer. He later turns the device on himself in **Barthes on Barthes** (1977a), where he presents a series of photographs of his family and of himself along with biographical snippets prior to presenting a series of paragraphs on his ideas.

Barthes's provocative account of Michelet incorporates the man and his human frailties into the themes of his writing. This serves not to correct, modify or even interpret Michelet, but situates him and his work by writing a new history which is of history and historians. While there is no aspiration to redemption in Barthes, there is something of Benjamin's concern with incorporating the past into the present in the way he uses Michelet's device of exploiting the tension between constructing a 'narrative' and constructing a 'tableau' (Barthes 1987: 22-23). The writing proceeds to

tell a story but will stop and build a complex scene, a moment in the past which is represented in all its detail "a second level of history, this one entirely panoramic" (Barthes 1987: 23). For Barthes this is primarily a task of writing, of using metaphor, of juxtaposition of details. But the photograph, which displaced the panorama,[8] provides a scene as opposed to a narrative, a scene that is always from the past and that has to be read like a tableau or a panorama, with the gaze moving across the plane of view in different directions, back and forward.

Representation

Benjamin's essay on photography (SHP) charts the evolving cultural impact of photography as a representational form. Rather than debate whether photography is an art form, his 'small history' is an account of the successive phases through which photography distinguishes itself from other forms of depiction: as an instrument of science; displacing portrait and landscape painting; and finally as the precise, unadulterated representation of the physical and social environment. Benjamin's account is not a precise chronological or a technological history but a reflection on the impact of the cultural innovation of photography.

The photograph can serve as a documentary device, a tool of history or science, because of its technological capacity to render minute detail and to "reveal the secret" of what is captured in front of the lens (SHP: 243). Benjamin terms the 'optical unconscious' that which the eye must have seen but which the conscious brain cannot discern or grasp due to size, motion, or inconspicuousness.[9] The camera records and freezes, enabling us to see what the human optical system cannot distinguish or abstract from its surroundings or the flow of movement. It is, Benjamin notes, able to capture, for example, what happens when "a person *steps out*" (SHP: 243), what the sculptor Rodin described as "the bizarre look of a man suddenly *struck with paralysis*" (cited in Virilio 1994: 2). While the painter or sculptor makes a series of skilful and painstaking actions to construct an image that represents the illusion of motion and life, the photographer in no time and with hardly any effort, faithfully and directly records each minute, frozen movement of the subject. The optical unconscious is captured not simply because of the short duration of the photographic process (even in its earliest examples), but also because of its capacity to record exhaustively. Foreground and background, important and trivial, formal pose and accidental gesture, intended smile and unintended grimace, the photograph presents each detail without discrimination. Moreover, through enlargement, that which is undetected by the ordinary gaze may be perceived and

explored. The photograph is thus not only immediate but also meticulous and complete.

The spark of contingency

For Benjamin, the photographer captures and attests to a particular momentary presence, full yet ephemeral, coaxing the subject to give up something of their own life to the photographic image. Early photography, even though used for experiment, recording or as a technical aid to painting rather than as a medium of communication in itself, often evoked a sense of presence in the viewer that was different from other forms of representation. When Benjamin writes of David Octavius Hill's photographic portrait of Mrs Elizabeth Hall, the "Newhaven fishwife" (c. 1843-1847), he refers to the "magical value" of the photograph which resides not so much in the intentions of the photographer, however talented, but rather in the subject herself, who "even now is still real" (SHP: 242-243). Indeed, the reader of the photograph is attracted to precisely those fragmentary and contingent irruptions which escape and confound the photographer's purpose. Benjamin writes:

> **No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the Here and Now, with which reality has so to speak seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future subsists so eloquently that we looking back may rediscover it. (SHP: 243)**

The "spark of contingency", marks the image as one that emanated only from a specific time and place, testifying to the reality of a scene as a picture of the past.[10]

Photography has the capacity to retain the unique and authentic presence of the subject whose aura of humanity we perceive as the "light struggles out of darkness" (SHP: 248), from the gloom that enshrouded the earliest photographs. The spark of contingency lies in the technology of early photography, which captured the “fullness and security” of a subject’s gaze (SHP: 247) because of the lack of artifice in the photographer's techniques and the investment of time by the sitter who "grew into the picture" (SHP: 245). The auratic quality he describes incorporates the presence of the bourgeois subject; posture, fashions and accessories, economic security and the paradoxical 'permanence' of those who are no more but whose traces remain (SHP: 245).

There is a deep ambivalence in Benjamin's response to aura in the photograph which is reflected in the ambiguity of the term. Aura is the then-and-there seen from the here-and-now, a "... strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance no matter how close the object may be" (SHP: 250). The auratic object is at once something unique, something with the authority of authenticity and something which carries a “testimony to the history it has experienced” (Benjamin 1992: 215). The viewer recognises something real and alive, something emanating from the image that can touch them; "To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return" (Benjamin 1983a: 148). But photography as a mechanical means of reproduction breaks the spell of aura, disenchants the image. The technology which offers multiple copies, which can reveal the optical unconscious and which can “meet the beholder halfway” (Benjamin 1992c: 214) by leaving the exhibition and coming into the reader’s home, begins to eradicate aura. As the object reaches closer to the masses, its uniqueness, its specificity in time and space and its authority decay. Benjamin describes how as photography came to supplant landscape and portrait painting, especially the miniature, the craft skills of artists who had abandoned the brush for the camera were soon displaced as "businessmen invaded professional photography from every side" precipitating "a sharp decline in taste" (SHP: 246). They produced absurdly dressed and posed, sentimental pictures commissioned for the family album but the haunting presence, the mark of aura, that had been lost through such banal and tasteless theatricality could not be restored through the new techniques of reproduction, retouching and tinting.

Pumping aura out

Faster lenses brought more light to the photograph and some photographers began to make different use of the rapidly increasing technical capacities and possibilities. Such photography, Benjamin argues, dissolved the murky halo which surrounded the earliest photographic images, rejected the spurious aura of commercial pictures and brought the world in front of the camera into sharp focus and close-up, finally putting "darkness entirely to flight" (SHP: 248). In taking pictures of what was "unremarked, forgotten, cast adrift" the French photographer Atget:

> **... was the first to disinfect the stifling atmosphere generated by conventional portrait photography in the age of decline. He cleanses this atmosphere, indeed he dispels it altogether: he initiates the emancipation of object from aura which is the signal achievement of the latest school of photography. (SHP: 249-50)**

In a memorable trope, Benjamin notes that the photographs of Atget "pump the aura out of reality like water out of a sinking ship" (SHP: 250). As the technology of mechanical reproduction displaced uniqueness and authenticity in the auratic work of art, authenticity became based in the practice of politics.[11] Atget's images are of repetition and emptiness, of objects and settings left by humans as traces of their existence; bootlasts, hand-carts, tables after people have finished eating but with the dishes not yet cleared away (SHP: 250-51). His attention to detail is combined with the most rigorous, unsentimental depopulating of the Parisian cityscape and in this respect, his works prefigure those of the surrealists:[12]

> **They are not lonely, merely without mood; the city in these pictures looks cleared out, like a lodging that has not yet found a new tenant. It is in these achievements that surrealist photography sets the scene for a salutary estrangement between man and his surroundings. It gives free play to the politically educated eye, under whose gaze all intimacies are sacrificed to the illumination of detail. (SHP: 251)**

The auratic "spark of contingency" has become the demystifying, profane "illumination of detail". The photographs of Atget lend themselves to the modern demand that images are brought closer to the masses through copying, and through inclusion in magazines. They do not attest to a specific time or place, or claim to represent any person; instead, they provide a “new way of seeing” the modern world (SHP: 251). Even if the human figure is at the centre of photographs such as those of August Sander, this new mode follows a scientific interest in documenting the physiognomy of human types, rather than producing an individual portrait. The body of work that records such types serves not as a “picture book“ to flatter the bourgeoisie but provides a “training manual” for those who would understand the political world of social origins (SHP: 252).[13]

Photography unmasks reality, de-reifies it, renders it malleable as critical proximity replaces contemplative distance. In this process, the close-up and the caption turn the image into a vehicle for comment. The photograph illuminates the detail in order to pass political judgement: "Is not the task of the photographer ... to reveal guilt and to point out the guilty in his photographs?" (SHP: 256). Herein lies the progressive promise of the mass reproduced photograph. Benjamin writes:

> **... to bring things *closer* to us, or rather to the masses, is just as passionate an inclination in our day as the overcoming of whatever is unique in every situation by means of its reproduction. Every day the**

> **need to possess the object in close-up in the form of a picture, or rather a copy, becomes imperative. (SHP: 250).**

What photography achieves, once it is released from the fascination with aura, is an illumination of the world through bringing its objects *closer* to us, freeing them from the darkness of the prehistory of photography, bringing them into the light of a critical history of culture. To meet this imperative, the task of the radical intellectual is also clear: "start taking photographs" (Benjamin 1983b: 95).

The photographic adventure

For Benjamin the various moments of the photograph were a series of ways in which the medium transforms cultural history to disenchant the real: the optical unconscious; the transmission of aura; the representation of cultural and political decay; the proto-surrealist political commentary. In his early work on photography, like Benjamin before him, Barthes was trying to grasp the significance of a medium that promised to capture the presence of the past with a mechanical precision that no previous technique of representation had achieved. He says of the news photograph for example, that it appears to have the status of a "message without a code" and appears to be the "perfect *analogon*", an exact representation of a scene. (Barthes 1977b: 17). But techniques (trick effects, the pose of the subject, use of objects, lighting, references to other art work/forms, juxtaposition to text[14]) enable the photograph to conceal its cultural meanings and associations, behind an apparently direct representation of reality. Like Benjamin, Barthes's early comments on photography consider the impact of photography on consciousness and the parameters of space and time:

> **The type of consciousness the photograph involves is indeed truly unprecedented, since it establishes not a consciousness of the *being-there* of the thing (which any copy could provoke) but an awareness of its *having-been-there*. What we have is a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction between the *here-now* and the *there-then*. (Barthes 1977c: 44)**

With this notion of the 'having-been-there' Barthes is pointing to the same sense of presence that Benjamin terms the "spark of contingency" when he tries to understand the auratic quality of early photography.

It is precisely this phenomenological effect that Barthes revisited in **Camera Lucida**, long after his preoccupation with the language of codes, connotation and denotation

had faded. Initially this text appears to be a personal investigation of his own responses to particular photographs that he finds provocative and stimulating, which “animate” him so that engagement with them becomes an "adventure" of photography (CL: 19). Barthes's interest lies not in the question of photography, but in Photographs that evoke desire or mourning, that he reads not as illuminating a thematic question “but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think” (CL: 21). How do these images address him from the past? Barthes identifies the ways that photographs become vehicles of meaning - photographers' techniques; the *studium*; the *punctum*; the ecstasy of the image - and, in the final instance, the ‘pathos’ in the spectator’s mind which moves him to respond to a photograph.

He begins by briefly exploring the various subject positions in relation to the photograph: the Operator, the photographer who takes the image; the Spectrum, the subject of the photograph; the Spectator, the reader of the image. It is the last of these that will preoccupy him. The perspective of the Operator is that of the aperture “... through which he looks, limits, frames and perspectivises when he wants to ‘take’ (to surprise)” the picture (CL: 10). As with Benjamin, the techniques of the photographer are part of the cultural significance of the images produced, but for the Barthes of **Camera Lucida** there are only a few “surprises” through which the Operator seeks to arrest the Spectator's gaze: the rarity or novelty of the Spectrum; photographic prowess;[15] displays of photographic techniques;[16] the lucky find (CL: 32-3).

Reading the Image

What Barthes focuses on is how the photographic image is *read*. In **Camera Lucida** he presents personal readings of particular images through which he pioneers a new language to express the distinctive and enduring power of photographic representation. Reminiscent of Benjamin's dialectical image, Barthes does not find the auratic quality of art in the technique of photography but in primitive theatre - masked and white faced performances, the Tableau Vivant - (CL: 31-32; 91; 118). As he says, the "inimitable feature" of Photography is that "someone has seen the referent (even if it is a matter of objects) *in flesh and blood* or again, *in person*" (CL: 79).

The adventure of visually reading a photograph depends on "the co-presence of two discontinuous elements" (CL: 23): the *studium* and the *punctum*. The typical meaning of the image as a cultural object, the "average effect" (CL: 26) or ordinary meaning of the photograph, which is the product of the reader's education within a particular

culture, identifies the *studium*. It is the polite, dispassionate, general interest which could equally be described as a particular disinterest:

> **The *studium* is that very wide field of unconcerned desire, of various interest, of inconsequential taste ... The *studium* is of the order of *liking*, not of *loving*. (CL: 27)**

The photographer and the viewer use a shared visual language to make “a contract arrived at between consumers and creators” in which the meaning of the photograph is understood (CL: 28). It is at the level of the *studium* that the photograph takes up a relation with society; to inform, to represent, to surprise, to cause to signify, to provoke desire. So, Barthes suggests that news and pornographic photographs represent what they depict in a single, uninterrupted way, effecting the moment of the *studium* but leaving the Spectator unmoved (CL: 41-42). Something else, of a different order, is needed to spark the "adventure" - the *punctum*.

For Barthes the photograph comes alive, becomes a matter of love and passion, only when a detail or a fragment interrupts, disturbs or stands out from the image. This is the *punctum*: a feature of the photograph which punctuates or punctures the *studium*. Like Benjamin's notion of aura, the *punctum* is neither a technical artefact nor a product of the Operator's intention and attempts to produce or mimic it inevitably fail.[17] The *punctum* is a quality discovered by the Spectator alone: the accidental, the coincidental, the "spark of contingency" within the image which 'pricks' the reader. Unmissable, uncoded, instantaneous, and intense, it is the fragment that rouses the 'docile cultural subject' that is the Spectator of the *studium* (CL: 43). To respond to the *punctum*, there must be an openness to the photograph which, based on the spectator's own particular interests and aesthetic concerns, leads to a personal, idiosyncratic reaction. The *punctum* “is what I add to the photograph and *what is nonetheless already there*” (CL: 55). Barthes gives as an example of the *punctum* the strapped pumps on the feet of a woman in a photograph of an African-American family taken by James van der Zee in 1926. These shoes, whose style seems too young for the age of the woman wearing them, "arouses great sympathy" in Barthes, "almost a kind of tenderness" (CL: 43). The *studium* in this image "… utters respectability, family life, conformism, Sunday best" but it is the *punctum* of the strapped shoes that moves Barthes because they look out of place. Later he changes his mind and suggests that the real *punctum* is the young woman's necklace which reminds him of a similar necklace worn by his unmarried aunt who lived a rather sad and dreary life (CL: 53). The *punctum* is the detail which alerts the Spectator's sensibility of an era, its values and manners, its tastes and fashions, its

aspirations and follies. It is not a quality of the photograph itself so much as a product of the Spectator's engagement with it. This is why the *punctum* is not the same for every Spectator or even for the same Spectator at different viewings. However, the interplay between the *studium* and the *punctum* fails to reveal the essential meaning, the *noeme*, of photography for which Barthes is searching. For this to occur, an even more intimate and painful exploration is needed.

The second part of **Camera Lucida** finds Barthes caught up in an emotional reviewing of old photographs of his recently deceased mother. His attention is suddenly arrested by one particular image taken in 1898; his mother as a child aged five, photographed with her brother (aged seven) in a Winter Garden. This is exactly the kind of humiliating family album photograph Benjamin detests as the mark of mediocrity, but for Barthes this picture reminds him of the contingency and specificity of the photographic image.[18] The photograph attests to the undeniable presence of his mother as a child, confirming the unique, unrepeatable, historical moment. This becomes the definitive characteristic of the photograph for Barthes:

> **... in Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past. And since this constraint exists only for photography, we must consider it, by reduction, as the very essence, the *noeme* of Photography ... The name of Photography's *noeme* will therefore be: 'That-has-been', or again: the Intractable. (CL: 76-77)**

Much like the aura that Benjamin finds in the Octavius Hill image, for Barthes the photograph authenticates the existence of the subject; their singularity, pose, expression, look - in sum, the "air" of the subject (CL: 107). It does so even when the subject has no recollection of being present - Barthes recalls an occasion when, given a photograph of himself, he could not remember it being taken. Nevertheless, "I could not deny that I had been *there* (even if I did not know *where*)" (CL: 85).

This evidential power of the photograph has a particular resonance in its presentation of the image of the dead, and especially, those whose death is imminent. Barthes writes of Alexander Gardner's 1865 photograph of Lewis Paine, taken just prior to Paine's execution for the attempted assassination of Secretary of State W. H. Seward:

> **The photograph is handsome, as is the boy: that is the *studium*. But the *punctum* is: *he is going to die*. I read at the same time: *This will be* and *this has been*; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake. (CL: 96)**

[Insert Figure 1 around here]

There is something profoundly sad about the 'that-has-been' of the photograph as the newly found form of the *punctum* - no longer a detail but now that intensity of the image which locates the referent of the spectrum as always alive, real yet in the past. The Spectator brings to photographs a knowledge of the future of that referent and in looking at historical photographs Barthes is aware that whatever youth and optimism is displayed there, these people are now dead (CL: 96). This is most painfully true of the Winter Garden picture that depicts his mother, her life still to be lived:

> **In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder ... over a catastrophe which has already occurred. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe. (CL: 96)**

The capacity of the photograph to be a "certificate of presence" is always backwards looking, a "prophecy in reverse" (CL: 87). The past is brought forcefully into conjunction with the present so that hindsight can interplay with prophecy; we know the future of the past.

With the Winter Garden photograph Barthes reaches a point at which analysis of any sort has to stop in the face of grief. He bemoans the limits of the photograph as an object that has no depth and presents only one surface to be explored; it is flat and impenetrable (CL: 106). The 'camera lucida' was an artist's optical device for looking through a prism at the scene being drawn while at the same time looking at the page on which the drawing was being formed. One eye takes in the depth of reality as the other constructs its two-dimensional image on the flatness of the sketchpad. For Barthes, the photograph is the camera lucida in reverse; we read from the two-dimensional image the three-dimensional reality that lies in the past, a reality 'That-has-been' (*Ça-a-été* – CL: 80). Like the camera lucida, the photographic camera provides an "emanation of the referent" but this time one from the past, fixed by the transformation of chemicals on a plate or paper.

Conclusions

The medium of critique that both Benjamin and Barthes engage in is writing but both, in addressing a diverse range of cultural forms, find photography a particularly provocative medium. For both, history is always present in cultural process and the confrontation of the present with the past is an indispensable aspect of critique. The photograph provides a moment about which such critique can operate, providing the possibility of a 'dialectical image' or a 'tableau' in which the flow of history is stopped

and becomes accessible in the moment. This is not however a characteristic of photography in general; some photographs fail to provide any such moment if they are contrived to show 'aura' for Benjamin, or if there is no 'punctum' which arrests the gaze and stimulates reading for Barthes.

Benjamin's tracing of the development of photography is concerned with its ability to penetrate and illuminate social and material conditions. As the early capacity to capture the aura of the subject is displaced by the imperatives of demystification, the task of the progressive photographer becomes to pump aura out of reality, reveal its secrets and thereby transform the perceptions of the masses. The photograph is educative, didatic; its gesture is critical and accusatory, "to point out the guilty" (SHP: 256). The “spark of contingency” is a characteristic of photography that endures independently of the artifice of the photographer or the artfulness of the subject. It marks the authenticity of the image, an authenticity that at a certain point is auratic, at another point is political. The authenticity of the image promises the possibility of engaging with the culture of a period, with the specificity of modernity as it unfolds.

Benjamin’s analysis dismisses the trivial, the amateur, the personal photograph. His interest is in the cultural status of photography as a medium that displaces art and speaks to the masses. Barthes, while recognising the photograph as a cultural force (the *studium*), looks for the altogether more personal moment of reading and engaging with photographs. In grappling with the problem of why some photographs attract his attention, he identifies in the *punctum* a moment in which the Spectator is drawn into an emotional relationship with the image. However, this only works with those public images, the reproduced, distributed and published photographs that Benjamin is interested in. For Barthes, the tension of the *studium* and *punctum* is insufficient to explain the attraction of those most private photographs, those that Benjamin dismisses as embarrassments.

In confronting the images of his own biography, in particular the Winter Garden photograph of his mother, Barthes discovers the potency of the photographic image in its testimony to reality in the past, the essence of ‘that-has-been’. Barthes recognises and values what Benjamin treats as a moment of photography's history, the "spark of contingency" which authenticates a past presence and 'wounds' the present Spectator. However, this altogether more personal and emotional - both painful and pleasurable - engagement with the past risks leading, via pity, to madness and finally to the perils of “photographic ecstasy” (CL: 119). The *durée* of Barthes engagement with the photograph is that of the reader's biography whereas for Benjamin, it is that of the epoch.

For Benjamin, the photograph subjects the social and material world to sober scrutiny and disenchants what has been: photography's political power is as a moment of mechanical reproduction, bringing art to the masses. For Barthes, this same capacity to attest to what has been is the very thing which threatens to bring a form of re-enchantment, a dizzying temporal vertigo: this is the seductive secret of photography that confronts the individual with the forces of history and mortality. Benjamin may account for why we should concern ourselves with the photograph, but it is Barthes who suggests why we might want to. Benjamin presents us with an armoury, Barthes promises us an adventure. The medium of photography suggests to Benjamin a means to confront the cultural past, to study the detail of the modern epoch as it develops. But for Barthes the medium opens up the lives of those who lived before us, whose history might overlap with ours and whose lives entwined with ours to reveal the continuity of culture, the cycle of life and death, of experience and emotions. Photographs are pictures that have, for both Benjamin and Barthes, such a forceful presence in the here and now that they challenge the power of the writer to bring the past alive in the present.

TD/GG 14.08.01

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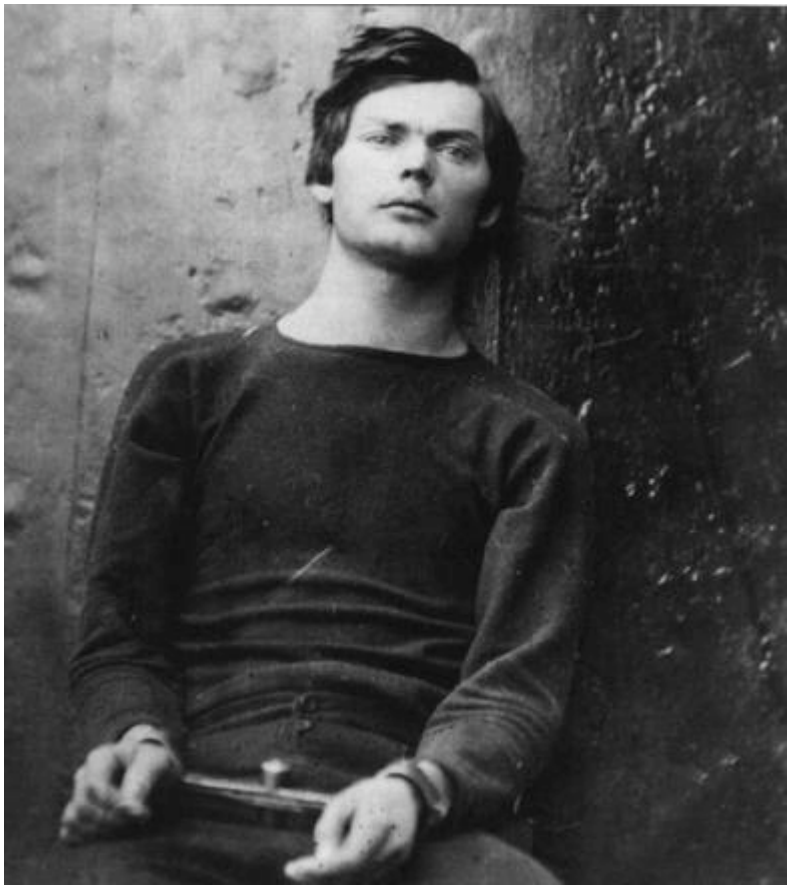

Figure 1. Photograph by Alexander Gardner (1865) of Lewis Paine prior to his execution.

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[1] An earlier version of this paper was presented to the first Walter Benjamin World Congress, University of Amsterdam, July 24th -26th, 1997.

[2] Some single images do show the passage of time. The futurist photographers the Bragaglia brothers, amongst others, developed techniques of catching movement and action in one image by using a slow shutter speed. An example of their 'photodynamism' is a 1912 image "The Slap", which captures the movement of the hand of one body making contact with the head of another in a series of blurred images on one photograph.

[3] Christian Metz (1991: 98) uses this term to refer to the denotative meaning of film - the narrative, characters, events, landscapes - in contrast to Barthes's concept of denotation in the photograph which is precisely that which is there in front of the camera and leads to the image.

[4] See Konvolut Y in Benjamin 1999: 671-692.

[5] Including; Daguerre or the Dioramas in "Paris - the Capital of the Nineteenth Century" (Benjamin 1983a), "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (Benjamin 1992c).

[6] In Mythologies he wrote on the "The Romans in Films", "The Face of Garbo", "The Iconography of the Abbé Pierre", "The Great Family of Man", "Photography and Electoral Appeal", "Ornamental Cookery" (1973) and "The Harcourt Actor" and "Shock Photos" (1979). See also Barthes 1977b; 1977c.

[7] In Benjamin's discussion of Brecht, ("What is Epic theatre?" 1983b: 13), he describes the moment when the action freezes into a tableau as one of "dialectics at a standstill", a moment which allows the audience to reflect on what has been happening.

[8] Benjamin notes that Daguerre's diorama was burned down in 1839, the same year that he announced the invention of the daguerreotype (Benjamin 1983a: 162).

[9] Benjamin writes: "It is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis" (SHP: 243). Without using the phrase 'optical unconcious', Benjamin discusses the same idea in the "Work of Art" essay as one of the characteristics of mechanical reproduction - 1992c: 214.

[10] As we shall see, this moment in which the photograph captures a past moment is what for Barthes becomes the ''that-has-been'', the *noeme* or essence of the photograph.

[11] See Benjamin 1992: 218 and 220: "With Atget, photographs become standard evidence for historical occurrences, and acquire a hidden political significance."

[12] "What renders a photograph surreal is its irrefutable pathos as a message from time past, and the concreteness of intimations about social class." (Sontag 1979: 54) Benjamin writes: "Atget's Paris photos are the forerunners of surrealist photography; an advance party of the only really broad column surrealism set in motion" (SHP: 249).

[13] Barthes also comments on the politics of Sander's photographs (CL: 36)

[14] Benjamin asks: "Will not the caption become the most important part of the photograph?" (SHP: 256).

[15] This corresponds to Benjamin's notion of the 'optical unconscious' - "a gesture apprehended at the point in its course where the normal eye cannot arrest it" (CL: 32) and the revelation of micro-detail through close-up.

[16] "... superimpressions, anamorphoses, deliberate exploitation of certain defects (blurring, deceptive perspectives, trick framing)..." (CL: 33) - precisely the sort of tedious visual tricks and contortions of the self-conscious, 'arty', 'creative' photographs which Benjamin loathes (SHP:254-55).

[17] Barthes writes: "Certain details may 'prick' me. If they do not, it is doubtless because the photographer has put them there intentionally" (CL:47).

[18] He does not reproduce the photograph in his book because it would merely be an “indifferent picture”, at most a *studium* for the reader but offering “no wound” (CL:73).