

# Benjamin and Barthes: a silent dialogue

Visual culture is a complex phenomenon that can be approached through several perspectives. With *A Little History of Photography* and *Camera Lucida*, Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes respectively gave a relevant contribution to the debate about photography. This writing draws a synthetic parallel between the two authors to highlight their surprising similarities.

*A Little History of Photography* was published for the first time in 1931 on the magazine "Die Literarische Welt" under the form of three different articles. There are several versions available in English: the quality of the translation varies sensibly from one another, not all of them carry the photographs, and in some of them "Short" replaces "Little" in the title. It would be advisable to opt for editions belonging to a collection of Benjamin's writing, for the editor's deeper knowledge of the author warrants a more accurate and reliable translation. It is also important to choose books with illustrations, for photographs are an integral part of the essay, and the author explicitly refers to them to explain his ideas. Apart from a few "core" photographs, different editors selected different pictures. The essay was not conceived for didactical purposes: in it there are no chapters yet just a few paragraphs (kindly added by the translator); thus enucleating the ideas is more difficult for the reader.

*Camera Lucida* (1980) was first published in Great Britain in 1982. The paper back editions carries all the photographs except for the enigmatic polaroid that opens the original version. Their quality, even though not exceptional, suffices to back up the author's remarks. The marked hypotaxis within *Camera Lucida* bodes poorly for the translation into the English language, an idiom where parataxis predominates. Additionally Barthes' generous use, not to say overuse, of parenthesis (any link between the phenomenological *epoché* and the literal bracketing?) further complicates the syntax. It is therefore not surprising that the English translation, caught between adherence to the original source and need of clarity of expression, ends up being verbose and fragmented. A glance at the contents, forty-eight chapters divided in two parts, should not mislead the reader: this is not a very structured reading either. Encapsulating his concepts into mostly short chapters was the least Barthes could do to guide the reader through his subjective and meandrous journey to observe the phenomenon of photography (3). The reader finds himself wandering through a labyrinth of apparently scattered thoughts, yet the Barthes (1980) lends him a thin thread: the author's pleasure leads the quest in the first part (p60), followed by love and death (in particular with reference to his mother's then recent death) (p73) in the second one. The explanatory chapters' titles could be effective lamp-posts shedding some light, yet they only appear in the contents, leaving the reader slightly disorientated when traveling from a chapter to another. Finally, the few enlightening references of the original version do not appear in the English version.

Both authors adopt an extremely sophisticated vocabulary; more than a deliberate literary virtuosity, this wording is a necessity. Their profound thoughts are intimately entangled within a broader cultural debate, and the writers are addressing a cultivated audience: they

need precise lexical instruments, i.e. very sophisticated words, to forcefully and neatly forge their ideas. Using rather uncommon names (e.g. fetishistic, physiognomic, mezzotint, incunabula, rubber print, estrangement, reification, augurs, (Benjamin, 1931), phenomenology, *mathesis singularis*, *eidolon*, *eidos*, filiation, metonymic, *satori*, *socious*, *animula*, *noeme*, aoristic, (Barthes, 1980)) is not enough; their reasonings are so original that the authors seem compelled to add new meanings to existing words, when not creating new ones. If Benjamin (1931) produces his own definition of aura (p518), Barthes (1980) renames old categories: *Operator* (photographer), *Spectrum* (subject), *Spectator* (viewer) (4). He also creates brand new ones, *Studium*, *Punctum* (10), *Unary Photograph* (17), and finally coins a neologism, “that-has-been” (32). Social and literary critic, expert in semiotics, Barthes very likely knows that creating words specific to only one object is a way for a language to acknowledge that object’s uniqueness within a class: photography can become an image apart.

The committed readers who will have to work quite hard on the texts, yet will be rewarded with illuminating thoughts. A thorough explanation and comparison of the texts would require an entire book, and would be beyond the scope of the essay. Nonetheless briefly limning the plots provides an indispensable frame to compare the contents.

Benjamin (1931) describes the disappearance of the aura from photography, and he chooses early portraiture to exemplify the concept. The early photographic portraits still bear the aura of their subjects, the halo emanating from a person, a breeze of his aliveness. In the early portraits this aura soaked on the photograph and blew through time, from the past of the subject to the present of the viewer (p510). Yet, advances in technique and more decisively the photographer’s attitude to it conjured to the erosion of this aura (p517). Atget, in particular, marked a turning point with his deserted streets of Paris and his focus on details. Through his photographic construction, Atget guided the viewer’s eye towards the details and away from the subject to which they belong. Decomposed and sterilized, the subject of the photograph (a person, an object, a work of art) is then framed on a ubiquitous, reproducible and perishable format (the photograph): the subject has been deprived of its aura. This phenomenon is celebrated as a positive evolution, for this detached and direct gaze on reality (p518/519) can serve political, scientific or physiognomic interests (p526). Ultimately, well contextualized by captions, photographs can be a document for the masses to understand reality. (p527) Benjamin (1931) holds a subversive position on the debate then raging about the relationship between art and photography. He claims that the focus should be on how the erosion of the artwork’s aura perpetrated by photography has changed the nature and notion of art within society. Reproduced innumerable times on perishable photographs (p519), the works of art have been miniaturized, made available to the masses and ultimately controlled by them (p523). In the light of this observation, the quarreling about photography being a form of art becomes quite marginal (p520 p523). This revolutionary concept of art will be fully expanded and explored by Benjamin in his more and perhaps most famous essay *The Work of Art in the Age of the Mechanical Reproduction*. In the latter, amongst others, Benjamin mainly synthesizes in the initial chapters the content of *The Little History of Photography*.

Barthes (1980) embarks on an ontological quest: to “try to formulate the fundamental feature, the universal without which there would be no Photography” (p9). He identifies in the that-has-been the *noeme*, or essence, of Photography (32) which is a specific form of

authentication of reality (36). Barthes explains that a photograph can only certify that someone/something has been there, then; this is all the picture can say/authenticate about the subject it represents (36). Yet, one photograph of his dead mother, the Winter Garden Photograph, by immortalizing the subject's air, reveals to him not only the evidence that his mother once was, yet the true essence of his mother. Through this picture he appropriated the essence of his mother. (p109) That Photograph, for him, and for him only, went beyond any other one in "making permanent..the truth-the truth for me"(p110). This is a subtle yet crucial point: a photograph certifies the past existence of a subject, yet, when and if, it says more about the subject, it is only on the viewer's subjective (as opposite of universal) level. Being a certificate of presence is the new gene that launches photography (p87) as a unique anthropological novelty (p88). Photography now mediates the subject's private identity through his public image: "Photography corresponds precisely to the explosion of the private into the public, or rather the creation of a new social value, which is the publicity of the private: the private is consumed as such: publicly" (p98). He also claims that when Photography fails its *noeme*, i.e. authenticating the that-has-been, it can turn into art, or worse, favor the creation of a society based on illusions (48).

Benjamin (1931) seems absorbed by social and political issues, he focuses on masses within a society. Barthes (1980) is tuned on the individual, on his identity, his intractable essence.

Benjamin (1931) looks up to a photograph as a properly captioned document to collect historical evidence for the masses (p527). For Barthes (1980) a photograph is the place where a spectator can seek his subjective evidence of reality (45).

Benjamin (1931) entrusts the photographer with the crucial tasks of constructing (p526) and explaining, by means of captions (p527), the photograph so that the masses can appropriate reality. Barthes (1980) is overall dismissive about the role of the operator (p9, 20, p99/100,p110); the whole onus of finding the meaning or the truth in a photograph is left to the spectator with his cultural and emotional uniqueness (10,20,45).

If Benjamin (1931) praises Sander for creating a photographic atlas of the social classes through direct observation (p520), Barthes declares that physiognomy has no scientific interest, and furthermore that "since a photograph is contingent (and thereby outside of meaning), Photography cannot signify (aim at generality) except by assuming a mask" (p34). A mask, more than revealing a truth supports an ideology.(15)

By peeling off the aura, photography has taken away uniqueness and duration from the artwork (Benjamin, 1931, p519); miniaturized art can then be controlled and consumed by the masses (Benjamin, 1931, p523). Photography, by reducing a person's identity (his intractable and durable essence) to his image (just an appearance) has publicly reduced an individual's private identity to his image (Barthes, 1980, p98). The way photography impacted on art according to Benjamin (1931), seems very similar to the way photography affected the individual according to Barthes (1980).

Finally Benjamin (1931) salutes the way photography cleanses the subject from its aura (p519), whereas Barthes (1980) celebrates the surfacing of the subject's air in a photograph (45). But what is the aura? And the air? Referring to the images of anonymous people that populate the paintings, Benjamin (1931) writes that "such pictures, if they last, do so only as a testimony to the art of the painter. With photography however, we encounter something new and strange: in Hill's Newhaven fishwife,..., there remains something that goes beyond testimony to the photographer's art, something that cannot be silenced, that fills you with an unruly desire to know what her name was, the woman who was alive there, who even now is still real and will never consent to be wholly absorbed in "art"" (p510). Benjamin (1931) as well speaks of life of the past (that-has-been) that feels still real in the present time of the viewer, and he also points out the specificity of the photograph in succeeding the breaking of the continuity of time. This description perfectly fits Benjamin's (1931) definition of aura: "A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it can be." (p518). For Barthes (1980) the air "is a kind of intractable supplement of identity... the air of a face cannot be decomposed: it is as irreducible as the identity it emanates from it...[it is] that exorbitant thing which induces from body to soul -*animula*" (p109). "The air is the luminous shadow which accompanies the body... it is by this tenuous umbilical cord that the photographer gives life" (p110). If a photographer misses the subject's air, his effigy will perpetuate yet not his identity, hence the subject will be dead forever (p110). The aura and the air are both an emanation of past reality that almost magically remains alive in the present of the viewer. Yet Benjamin (1931) sees an aura in some old photographic portrait and shares it with his readers; he presumes them capable of detecting it as well. Barthes(1980), on the contrary, uses his vision of the air to explain the concept to his readers, yet never shares his picture because he knows that only him, through his love for the subject, can appropriate the air of subject, the subject's true essence : "I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the ordinary; it cannot in any way constitute the visible object of a science, it cannot establish an objectivity in the positive sense of the term." (p73).

Benjamin died in 1940, he could not read *Camera Lucida*. Forty years later Barthes might as well have read Benjamin's essays, but no mention of the latter appears in his book. Yet these two texts seem to have started a dialectic dialogue on their own. They touch on many common areas, yet their lenses reflect almost parallel universes. Within the visual culture they coexist with equal dignity and force despite their compelling yet contrasting views showing an evidence of the vastness and vitality of the visual universe.

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