

The Apotheosis of Everyday Life

Benjamin, Surrealism and Photography

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When Walter Benjamin subtitled his 1929 essay on Surrealism: *The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia*, he invoked a word intimately associated with photography, and a word, the connotations of which divest it of the strictly compositional and technical proficiency of a 'high' art practice and site it firmly within the 'repertoire' of the artificial, the hasty and even the pretentious. If Benjamin had merely sought to pick over the psycho-sexual strands of Surrealism and consider its deeply problematic flirtation with fetishism, he might have substituted the word with something suggesting a premature ejaculation; however what he so brilliantly suggests in *Surrealism* and in *A Small History of Photography*, and which is itself so brilliantly examined and expanded upon by Susan Sontag (in her essay on Benjamin and in *On Photography*), is the crucial relation of photography to Surrealist praxis, and the latter's dependence on the medium to achieve its greatest efflorescence in the category of the uncanny.

Of 'surrealist' photography it is paradoxically the pre-surrealist, Atget, who offers a consistent oeuvre which explores the uncanny, the fragmentary, disturbed world of modernity as imagined by Aragon and Breton, and which, unlike the 'wet-dream', fashion-driven styles of Man Ray, Miller et al, retains a certain distance in relation to the apotheosis, and aestheticisation, of everyday life. One could say of Atget's photographs of Paris that they acquired an 'instant' air of nostalgia. But this nostalgia has, I feel, more to do with the cultural baggage passed down from the nineteenth century than with their own qualities as photographs. A hangover of Romantic sensibility that was polished by Surrealism's cult of appropriation. In Benjamin's words, Atget's photographs "work against the exotic" and "pump the aura out of reality". They are quite sterile of the "interesting juxtapositions" which turn photography into "a sort of arty journalism". "They are not lonely, merely without mood".

Whereas so much 'official' Surrealist photography is crippled by "its capitulation to fashion", Atget is marked off by Benjamin as the "advance party of the only really broad column surrealism managed to set in motion." One can look to the fringes of the 'official' Surrealists to find later examples of photographers who explored the murkier connections of human relations, Boiffard, Brassai and Kertész for example, but they were more often associated with the Contre-Attaque group centred around Bataille, who was incidentally later to be a trusted friend of Benjamin's during the latter's exile in Paris, and hid two suitcases full of Benjamin's papers and manuscripts in the Bibliothèque Nationale during the Occupation. There is a deep significance here which I will not go into because of the complexity of the issues at stake, but suffice to say that, as Benjamin noted in 1929, the 'revolutionary' force of Surrealism was focussed on internal wranglings, leaving the torch of profane illumination to be snatched up by those outside of the 'political' structure of the official group.

Photography and Profane Illumination

Benjamin is preoccupied with the trope of 'experience' which he senses is at the heart of Surrealism; its "writings are concerned literally with experiences, not with theories and still less with phantasms." This direct relation to life itself is what I believe Benjamin ascribes to Surrealism as its greatest revolutionary force, one which revolts against bourgeois complacency and nationalisms, Catholicism and Protestant moral stagnation. Benjamin invokes the pantheon of Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Apollinaire and Dostoevsky as the precursors of Surrealist revolt, and in their work traces out the process he calls profane illumination through which one finds a "cult of evil as a political device...to disinfect and isolate against all moralising dilettantism." In particular he sees this process continued by Aragon and Breton, in their works *Le Paysan de Paris* and *Nadja*, in the poetic 'intoxication' generated by their peregrinations around Paris and through their perception of the 'outmoded', the concept of a radical rejection of the modern in favour of an aesthetic based on a transfiguration of the debris of the Past. Of course, this would appeal to Benjamin as a collector, the reclusive son of an haute-bourgeois art dealer, the archetypical flâneur determined to work against the flow of mainstream culture and forge ahead a philosophy of aesthetics inherently individualistic.

This Surrealist concept of revolutionary 'experience' recognises the "immense forces of 'atmosphere'" and seeks to utilise them in a reworking of the perception of everyday life. One could perhaps see the anti-rational aspect of this game as fundamental to an understanding and incorporation of the uncanny into a way of life that is a constant affirmation of difference and an awareness of the psychic need to feel apart from the course of mainstream bourgeois culture, to experience a rupture in the continuum of 'Progress'. The growing dissatisfaction with the political revolution in the Soviet Union, which in the late 1920s and early 1930s slowly filtered through to 'fringe' Marxists such as Benjamin, engendered a need for more personal forms of revolutionary action which were beyond the beck and call of any party. This is the basis, I think, for Benjamin's emphasis on profane illumination as a strategy for opposition to the restrictive moralities of bourgeois and communist dogmas. But Benjamin is not under the illusion that profane illumination is open to the 'masses'; at the tail end of *A Small History of Photography* and later in the 1936 essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, he calls for the caption to become a specific site of work and attention for the artist/photographer in order to underline their message and break the mystique of a work's aura for those not initiated into the arcane worlds of philosophy and aesthetics.

Photography plays a subtle role in this understanding of Benjamin's position regarding Surrealism, it insinuates itself between representation and reality forming a seduction of perception, an allegory of modernity which figures in Benjamin's cosmology as a space for the projection of desire in the urban labyrinth. Atget's photographs are uncanny because they are spaces apart from one's idea of a modern metropolis, it is as if they are waiting for the events they ought to record to happen. If at any time they acquired an 'instant' factor of nostalgia for a beholder it is precisely because of this that they collapse linear time into a spatial condition. The nostalgia would be for something that never really existed. The 'atmosphere' of Paris that they are so often accused of evoking is always assumed, and for this reason they shatter the 'authenticity' of the photograph as a record of 'truth'. They are inherently empty like stage sets without actors or audience. But this is also why Benjamin says that Atget "initiates the emancipation of the object from aura", for they are ideal spaces for individuals to project their own desires and fantastical imaginings. A 'true' space for individual revolt against established theories of the aesthetic.

It is the photograph which in Surrealism becomes like a religious relic, and which through a certain triviality becomes grotesque, its professed naïvete an "easy irony" (Sontag). However Surrealism, as Susan Sontag notes, also discovered it as "an enigmatic, even perverse, rather than merely intelligible or beautiful object." Perhaps this is best seen in Atget, who was a discovery (un trouvé) of the Surrealists, rather than in the self-conscious experiments of Surrealist photographers themselves. In Atget's work, the collapse of time into space "turns the flow of events into tableaux" (Sontag), like scenes from the Passion or of the Madonna in Catholic iconography. One can also think back to Baudelaire and his *Tableaux Parisiens* which Benjamin could cite as another pre-Surrealist literary evocation of the fragmentary modern world, and the isolated littérateur as the figure of the latter-day 'modern' man. Thus a photograph by Atget, whose work was perhaps an oeuvre trouvé, is more 'surreal' than the self-consciously "interesting juxtapositions" of Man Ray because of "its irrefutable pathos as a message from time past, and the concreteness of its intimations about social class" (Sontag). It functions as an excerpt, a snapshot or quotation from the indistinct past, which can be reincorporated into a critique of the contemporary precisely because of its value as a 'moment' from a history. It makes no claims for itself and leaves the spectator to interpret at will.

The Photographic Monad

The photograph has another aspect that has been touched upon but not dealt with; for Benjamin it corresponds visually with his concept of the figure — an image which embodies a concept within its very own nature. The flâneur is such a figure for modernity. The concept of the figure, like much of Benjamin's philosophy, has its roots in Jewish mysticism, the tradition of the Kabbalah and medieval Alchemy, and is a modern equivalent perhaps of the monad (and perhaps again a link back to Leibnitz?). Benjamin was very fond of quotations, his *Arcades Project* was based significantly around ones which he had collected over his lifetime, and many of his essays hinge upon one or two carefully chosen quotes. His dream, it is related, was to write a book entirely composed of quotations. I think that photographs themselves had such a quality for him as did quotations, a direct image

equivalent; things that were photographed could pass from the coherence of everyday experience into the mythology of (a surrealist) 'reality'.

This transformation of everyday experience brings photography into the "magical realm of words", creating a new form of "esoteric poetry" and reverie bypassing language. Like the Kabbalists and Alchemists, Benjamin ascribes power to the Word, returning to it a mystical significance forgotten by philosophy, denied by Marxism. As poetry, the photograph is always set apart from 'reality' and never quite absorbed into it by virtue of its objecthood; it exposes an "optical unconscious" through its revelations. The mysterious processes of the darkroom, of slow motion and zoom photography are like the occult and forbidden practices of the alchemist. Photography itself is thus profane, and at its most elliptical and abstruse, least self-conscious, it is a route to profane illumination. The snapshot, like the spoonerism, or slip of the tongue, reveals aspects of ourselves that were hither-to obscured. The snapshot may ostensibly be a mistake, or a poor attempt to mimic the style of ubiquitous, 'great' landscape, cityscape or portrait photography, but it is always revealing because it is never fetishistic, never falls prey to a "capitulation to fashion". A photograph of someone is always already a historical document and one's desire to 'know' the 'original' context is always already circumscribed by the flimsy actuality of the photograph itself. One can symbolically 'possess' the subject of a photograph, but its significance is wrapped up in one's own relation to it as some sort of excerpt from 'reality', not in any intrinsic value of the photograph as an object itself.

Photography in the Image Sphere

By contrasting two different conceptions of Surrealism Benjamin could be said to be covertly claiming for himself a space between Marxism, bourgeois lifestyle and another, anarchic form of revolution. He proposes a keen understanding of revolution that does not exclude those who do not pursue the line of 'intoxication', social tumult and violence, but who never-the-less are able to reach the desired profane illumination: "The reader, the thinker, the loiterer, the flâneur, are types of illuminati just as much as the opium eater, the dreamer, the ecstatic. And more profane." He perceives the flaw at the heart of socialist conditions of representation — 'optimism' — and its distinct and troubling indication of the mere facade of revolution, one that is more concerned with changing external circumstances than attitudes. Surrealism at its most raw is a political action which Benjamin ordains a rupture of metaphysics; it burst onto what he calls the "image sphere" demanding the kind of attention to its message that was previously a contemplation of 'metaphor' by the intelligentsia. That contemplation, he maintains, had ceased to be a valid position for the Illuminatus.

Benjamin finds Surrealism, and the Surrealists not always 'equal' to the heady profane illumination he prescribes, and sees the movement's own first steps "into the humid backroom of spiritualism" of which he disapproves. This could be seen as a first step away from revolt in the direction of bourgeois assimilation. One can also begin to discern some of the problems with fetishism here, and the origins of the movement's "capitulation to fashion" as a sanitised approach made palatable for bourgeois consumption. Lautréamont's famous image of the "chance encounter" of an umbrella and a sewing-machine on a dissecting table was photographed twice by Man Ray; once literally and once with the objects wrapped. Such trite treatments, even worse objects by Dali (for instance the *Lobster Telephone*) and the domination of so much later Surrealist work by pseudo-Freudianism, trivialised the radical aspect of the 'surreal' and served it up on a platter for mass bourgeois consumption, hardly the kind of emancipation from aura that Benjamin would later hope mechanical reproduction would initiate. Surrealist taste became fashionable because of its ability to aestheticise the everyday, to make the unconventional exotic and, in a word, beautiful. It consolidated a new concept of the aura of a work of art. Everyday life itself suddenly became the material with which an (avant-garde) artist could impose a 'surrealist' vision.

This is the kernel of the problem of the Surrealist approach: it achieves what might be described as the apotheosis of everyday life, the elevation of the mundane to the position of touchstone for what Benjamin calls profane illumination, and yet in a co-existent and double action renders this illumination trivial, even to the point of fore-shortening the effect of the experience by virtue of its own "capitulation to fashion". By the mid 1930s the 'mainstream' of Surrealism had been well assimilated into bourgeois culture so that the power of its

revolutionary aesthetics was hardly more than titillating or risqué. Even the fringes of the group, including those who re-grouped under various different banners after the bitter 1929 split, were no strangers to such assimilation. However within and without the 'official' group, various Surrealists continued to pursue the ideas of revolution and to seek the kind of profane illumination Benjamin is so keen to promote. One might think of Meret Oppenheim's *Breakfast in Fur* and her powerful and bizarre photographic collaboration with Man Ray, *Veiled Erotic*, as part of the darker, more ambivalent approach of Surrealism to questions of human (erotic) relations. Others like Hans Bellmer, Brassai and Bataille, for example, continued to explore the boundaries of experience from positions more akin to that of Benjamin; from the positions of readers, thinkers, loiterers and flâneurs for whom the "profane illumination of thinking" was more revealing than the 'passionate' investigations of automatic writing, drawing or dream writing which ultimately tended to produce little more than the images of puerile fantasy that have become Surrealism's trademark.

The photograph was to remain the most consistent medium in these more radical strains of Surrealist praxis. Photography itself exists as more than just a record of objects and performances, it is a major constituent of the sphere of images that Benjamin believed profane illumination points toward. As well as moving away from the aura of the individual work of art, he believed that the camera was getting "ever readier to capture fleeting and secret moments whose images paralyse the associative mechanisms of the beholder." These "fleeting moments" are images of what could be called the uncanny – disquieting and unsettling – and like Atget's photographs of Paris, Boiffard's close-ups of toes and Brassai's pictures of graffitied walls, fall between representation and reality. According to Benjamin they require the caption in order not to "remain arrested in the approximate", but to turn "all life's relationships into literature".

The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia

Surrealism was typified for Benjamin in the figure of the snapshot, something that could break the skin of aura, something that could evade the strictures of an intelligentsia predominated by bourgeois values. The snapshot stood in for those forgotten and ignored spaces which were outside the canons of beauty and discourse, which that "revolutionary intelligentsia" had found to be ideal for another kind of poetic experience, one of "revolutionary nihilism". That 'nihilism' was the inheritance of the nineteenth century's "cult of evil" as political action from which Surrealism traced its roots via Apollinaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Lautréamont and Baudelaire. For each of these writers, it was necessary to shatter preconceptions of established traditions, hierarchies and aesthetics in order to see the world anew. For the Surrealists, and for Benjamin, the photograph represented an astonishing opportunity to make concretely visual their perception of the modern world, a perception that 'read' into the language of objects and human relationships a quality that was more than 'real'. The "crisis of the intelligentsia" referred to the break up of metaphysics in the face of rampant materialism, unrestrained industrialisation and disturbing trends in politics away from "the humanistic concept of freedom", a crisis for which Surrealism was seen by Benjamin to be the last attempt at challenging from an intellectual position. The 'surreal' photographs of Atget and Sander identified for him the visual spaces available for a profane illumination without becoming assimilated into bourgeois aesthetics via an adoption of aura. Benjamin's insight was to realise that without the visual impact of photography Surrealism would not have the means with which to move beyond metaphysics into the "image sphere" to effect its revolution. One has only to look to the contemporary advertising industry to assess the incredible pervasion of 'surrealist' conceptions of the everyday. The Marxist revolutionary sheen may have worn away after half a century's intensive use, but Surrealism still has enormous power to cause important, if subtle, shifts in our understanding of the world. Benjamin's Surrealist alarm clock is still to this day, one that "in each minute rings for sixty seconds".

Sources

Walter Benjamin – *One Way Street and Other Writings* (1979)

Walter Benjamin – *Illuminations* (1968)

Susan Sontag – *On Photography* (1977)