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Shedding the veils, making room: on some photographic motives in Walter Benjamin

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Abstract

This article analyses two photographic motives in Walter Benjamin's work. The first one, encompassed by the expression ''shedding veils'', concerns Blossfeldt's photographs as well as the links they establish with a broader philosophical and aesthetical tradition. A first development of this motive focuses on ''Little History of Photography'' (1931) and on the relation between technology and magic. On the other hand, ''News about flowers'', a review of Blossfeldt's work written three years before, establishes a connection with morphological questions. Therefore, the optical unconscious points explicitly to the uncovering of analogies and forms, and implicitly to a ''cosmos of similarity'' which can be said to be at the core of Benjamin's theory of mimesis. The historical tensions brought forth by technology gain a new meaning when read against this mimetic background. The second motive addresses the fundamental role Atget plays on Benjamin's historical reading of photography and, consequently, on the relation between photography and the representation of the city. In this context, and without avoiding the complex and often misread question of the aura, it is important to understand how Atget's photographs are creating the conditions for a further development of the photographic technique and at the same time transforming our perception. The expression ''making room'', which covers a wide range of meanings spanning from the literal/technological to the metaphorical one, belongs to a spatial dimension of Benjamin's thought presupposing a movement of destruction–construction. At the same time, it is related to the fertility of the concept of *Spielraum*, room for *manoeuvre*/play. Bringing closer such texts as ''The destructive character'', ''The Work of Art'' essay or the texts on Naples and Ibiza, this article is also a reading of the critical tasks set in motion by Benjamin's thought.

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Technology and magic

In the first pages of "Little History of Photography", Benjamin describes a portrait of the photographer Karl Dauthendey and his wife who, after the birth of their sixth child, he found lying in the bedroom with her veins slashed. Absorbed in an ominous distance, the gaze of that woman dominates the photograph, generating a temporal dialectic which entails the possibility of looking to the past while anticipating the future. According to Benjamin, this is something that only a photograph is capable of. While subtly circumscribing the specificity of photography, he draws our attention to the relation between technology and magic: *"Immerse yourself in such a picture long enough and you will realize to what extent opposites touch, here too: the most precise technology can give its products a magical value, such as a painted picture can never again have for us"*[1].

This sentence is both a characterization of the photographic medium, in comparison to painting and a display of its paradoxes, of the tensions it creates. The magical value is related to the "tiny spark of contingency" that, having seared the image character, allows the beholder to experience a temporal movement between past, present and future. The existence of this tiny spark does not depend on the photographer's art and the traditional concepts used to define art, specially painting, are of little use to understand its strength.

The main historical-aesthetical-technological thread of this text is well known. Let us put it in a blunt way. The first decade after photography's invention comprised a period of flourishing. Represented by such photographers as David Octavius Hill or Nadar, this was the period when the subjects depicted and the techniques used were congruent, when the photographs maintained an aura – a fact that was inseparable from the technical qualities of the apparatus. Then, coinciding with the industrialization of photography (in particular put it in a blunt way the development of the visiting-card picture by Disderi) and with several technical developments applied in the production of an artificial aura, a period of decline came. This decline was deeply related to the expanding of the *bourgeois* and capitalist societies. Nevertheless, at the time the essay was written, Benjamin could already envisage a process of revitalization: freed from the influence of pictorialism and exploring the technical possibilities of photography, a new generation of photographers was working in fertile grounds, following physiognomic, political and scientific interests. In this context, Atget has a prominent position, but Benjamin particularly appraises the works of his contemporaries Sander,

1 BENJAMIN, W., "Little History of Photography", in *Selected Writings* (*SW*), vol. 2, p. 510.

Blossfeldt, Heartfield or Germaine Krull.

Taking into consideration this framework, the above mentioned photograph of Dauthendey should be included within the first and flourishing period of photography. But the essay (and generally what Benjamin says about photography) is much more complex and nuanced. The *"tiny spark of contingency"* describes a general characteristic, because the magical value of photographs exceeds any strict historical delimitation. Besides, it is not restricted to portraiture. In fact, as Benjamin puts in the continuity of the Dauthendey section, photography not only captures the structuring details of reality, but also reveals *"physiognomic aspects, image worlds, which dwell in the smallest things – meaningful yet covert enough to find a hiding place in waking dreams, but which, enlarged and capable of formulation make the difference between technology and magic visible as a thoroughly historical variable"*[2]. The magical value here points to another direction, to the disclosure of a secret (or perhaps the disclosure of this secret is the unfolding, the combustible irradiation of the tiny spark). The privileged example here is Blossfeldt and his photographs of enlarged plants [Fig. 1]. Using the technique of enlargement, he revealed one of those hidden universes which constitute our optical unconscious, in this case the secret correspondences between the forms of plants and artistic forms: *"Blossfeldt with his astonishing plant photographs reveals the forms of ancient columns in horse willow, a bishop's crosier in the ostrich fern, totem poles in tenfold enlargements of chestnut and maple shoots, and gothic tracery in the fuller's thistle"*[3]. As a teacher of art in Berlin, Blossfeldt believed in the artistic and architectural qualities of plants and he treated the photographs as teaching tools.

We can easily agree on the similarities between plants and forms of art. But, is this similarity a mere question of analogical resemblance? What kind of secrets lay within the optical unconscious? And how are they related to other aspects of Benjamin's thought?

"News about flowers"

The technique of enlargement guides us into a space of structural intimacy. But Blossfeldt's photographs go beyond the purely analogical aspects; they are not merely revealing a curious coincidence between forms in nature and forms of art, as if the latter were imitating the former. In a review titled "News about flowers", published in *Die Literarische Welt* in 1928, three years before "Little History of Photography", Benjamin writes, for the first time, about Blossfeldt's book. He cherishes it for having shown something extraordinary, furnishing the inventory of human perception with a contribution capable of changing our image of the world in unforeseen ways. In this sense, Benjamin follows Lazlo Moholy-Nagy premises – rooted in the spirit of the Bauhaus – by saying that even the research in photography can lead to original and creative results. *"It is not the person ignorant of writing but the one ignorant of photography who will be the illiterate of the future."*[4] This sentence appears again, though

2 *Idem*, *ibidem*, p. 512.

3 *Idem*, *ibidem*.

4 MOHOLY-NAGY, L., *apud* BENJAMIN, W., "News about flowers", *SW*, vol. 2, p. 156.

[Fig. 1]

KARL BLOSSFELDT
Blumenbachia hieronymi (Loasaceae), 1932, *Gelatin silver print*
25.9 × 20.8 cm (10 3/16 × 8 3/16 in.)
The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

without a reference to its author, in "Little History of Photography", and it can be said to illustrate the importance of that period (the Weimar Republic) in the development of photography. This is not the place to investigate the confluence between Moholy-Nagy's and Benjamin's ideas on photography nor on the relation between art and technology. However, it is important to stress the fact that they shared a concern with the widening of perception, with the emancipation of photography from other arts, foreseeing a utopian dimension in technology. The "new vision" belongs to a set of progressive contributions which involve, or should involve, the human being in its wholeness, in its relation to life.

Blossfeldt's book is a new contribution to the old debate on the relation between nature and art. But the secret those photographs reveal is linked to a broader question on form: the relation between form and creation, the question of metamorphosis. Benjamin put it clearly while addressing the title of the book, *Originary Forms of Art* (*Urformen der Kunst*): the expression "forms of art" being considered equivalent to "originary forms of nature". These forms were never a mere model for art, but *"were, from the beginning, at work as originary forms in all that was created"*[5]. In this sense, and because it touches the secret of creation, Benjamin links Blossfeldt's work to Klee's and Kandinsky's painting. However, the painters are closer to a secret enabled by the microscope (enlargement of what is small) and not by the photographic enlargement (enlargement of what is big). Benjamin does not expand this analogy but we may presuppose that he is referring to the primordial elements in Klee's and Kandinsky's work resulting from a sort of depuration (of lines, dots, colours, movements), elements which open to spiritual and cosmic visions. Using other techniques and aiming at different results, Blossfeldt photographs absorb and reveal inner image-imperatives not limited to a mere reproduction of forms: *"Leaping toward us from every calyx and every leaf are inner image-imperatives [Bildnotwendigkeiten], which have the last word in all phases and stages of things conceived as metamorphoses"*[6]. This feminine and vegetable principle of life can be said to work under the seemingly randomness of the surface of things, even under what we call invention; in fact, it is the *"dialectical opposite of invention: the Natura non facit saltus of the ancients"*[7]. Therefore, we can approach it to Goethe's *Urphänomen*, the primal image whose revelation occurs in the unfolding of the individual phenomena.

The review on Blossfeldt's book ends with the following sentence: *"We, the observers, wander amid these giant plants like Liliputians. It is left, though, to fraternal great spirits – sun-soaked eyes, like those of Goethe and Herder – to suck the last sweetness from these calyxes"*[8]. The sweetness is only accessible to those who are able to see it. The expression sun-soaked eyes (sonnenhaften Augen) is meaningful: the verb *haften* that forms the adjective *sonnenhaften* means something that is immersed, connected in a profound way, captivated. Goethe uses this expression in the "Introduction" to his *Theory of Colours* (*Farbenlehre*), suggesting, against the causal and scientific

5 BENJAMIN, W., "News about flowers", *SW*, vol. 2, p. 156.
6 *Idem*, *ibidem*.
7 *dem*, *ibidem*, p. 157.
8 *Idem*, *ibidem*.

explanations on the relation between the eye and the light, a position that is closer to an ancient and affinitary theory of vision, according to which *''like is only know by like''*[9]. This theory, presupposing the idea that our eyes are linked to the sun, is part of a philosophical perspective firstly formulated by Empedocles: it argues that our vision results from a fire emanated both from the objects perceived and from the eyes, the intraocular fire. Empedocles' theory is an initial step of a long-term debate regarding the metaphysical principles sustaining the idea ''like is only known by like'', principles of kinship he also applies to biological questions. Anyway, and despite the different interpretations and the critics of Aristotle concerning the biological questions raised by Empedocles, he was *''the first thinker to see that biology needs both randomness and principles of organization in its explanatory equipment''*[10]. Usurping the well-known opposites which guide Empedocles thinking (love and strife), we might say that besides all the strife, a gifted love capable of sucking the sweetness of nature bonds Empedocles and Blossfeldt.

Some final remarks on the Benjaminian reading of Blossfeldt's photographs.

Because Blossfeldt touches the heart of morphological questions, Benjamin focuses on those aspects where philosophical, artistic and scientific questions interweave. Throughout his work, he often refers to Goethe's morphological method, adapting an important part of it to his own historical thinking.[11]

Some passages of the review seem to prepare themes that Benjamin will develop in ''Little History of Photography''. In a certain sense, and without disregarding the importance of psychoanalysis, we might speculate about the importance of the review for the formation of the concept of optical unconscious – or perhaps following Miriam Bratu Hansen we should call it, not a concept, but an ''experimental metaphor'' having multiple and shifting meanings[12]. Either way, much of Benjamin's thinking concerning photography is an attempt to identify how the technical features can contribute to an uncovering of reality. In Blossfeldt's case, the reality of analogies and forms. *''Only the photograph is capable of this [revelation]. For a bracing enlargement is necessary before these forms can shed the veil that our stolidity throws over them.''*[13] By shedding the veils that cover different forms of reality, photographic enlargement allows us to study not the ''real reality'' but the secrets and forces driving reality: this might explain the emphasis on the physiognomic, scientific or political elements

9 GOETHE, J. W., *Theory of Colours*, p. xxvi.

10 KIRK, G.S., RAVEN, J. E., SCHOFIELD, M., *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 307.

11 An explicit reference can be found in BENJAMIN, W., *The Arcades Project*, [N2a, 4], p. 462: *''In studying Simmel's presentation of Goethe's concept of truth, I came to see very clearly that my concept of origin in the Trauerspiel book is a rigorous and decisive transposition of this basic Goethean concept from the domain of nature to that of history. Origin – it is, in effect, the concept of Ur-phenomenon extracted from the pagan context of nature and brought into the Jewish contexts of history. Now, in my work on the arcades I am equally concerned with fathoming an origin. To be specific, I pursue the Origin of the forms and mutations of the Paris arcades from their beginning to their decline, and I locate this origin in the economic facts. Seen from the standpoint of causality, however (and that means considered as causes), these facts would not be primal phenomena; they become such only insofar as in their own individual development – ''unfolding'' might be a better term – they give rise to the whole series of the arcade's concrete historical forms, just as the leaf unfolds from itself all the riches of the empirical world of plants.''*

12 HANSEN, M. B., *Cinema and Experience. Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*, p. 156.

13 BENJAMIN, W., ''News about flowers'', p. 156.

Benjamin envisages in the work of the new photographers.

The notion of optical unconscious, besides its obvious – though detoured – relation with psychoanalysis, has an implicit relation with the mimetic dimension of Benjamin's thought. From the point of view of "Little History of Photography", the similarities between plants and forms of art are, firstly, an example of the magic value of photography, but if we compare it to the review from 1928, they are at the same time a manifestation of a cosmos of similarities. In a fragment probably written in 1932, which comprises a sketch for a rational astrology, Benjamin addresses the question of mimesis: *"We start with 'similarity'. We then try to get clarity about the fact that the resemblances we can perceive, for example, in people's faces, in buildings and plant forms, in certain cloud formations and skin diseases, are nothing more than tiny prospects from a cosmos of similarity."*[14] The forces governing this cosmos of similarity involve both the mimetic objects and the mimetic centres, the human beings, and can be approached to the "image imperatives" shared by plants and works of art. In the text "Doctrine of the Similar", the mimetic power is conceived as partially unconscious and the iceberg image is used to explain this feature. In both the ontogenetic and phylogenetic sense, that power has a historical nature.[15] When compared to ancient times, nowadays we only have access to a limited sphere of the mimetic power.

It is important to note that the category of mimesis cannot be reduced to the element of reproduction, nor to the general concepts usually employed to describe the relation between images and reality. The classical theory of image says that an image is a representation of reality because of the resemblance it has with the original. This iconic principle, together with the concomitant one of indexicality, is useful for a broad definition of photography. However, for Benjamin, this is not the most important thing. He conceives mimesis as *"the organon of experience"*[16] and much of his reading of modernity is informed by the tensions occurring throughout the historical, technical, and perceptual transformations of experience. These tensions call for an evaluation of the categories traditionally employed to understand aesthetic phenomena, such as aura or beautiful semblance. In this sense, *"with the optical unconscious, one might say, the mimetic faculty has migrated into the visual media and their aesthetic possibilities"*[17]. If photography is mimetic, it is less because it reproduces reality and more because of the possibility of stimulating the mimetic power in human beings. This is the power that children exercise in the most profound way, engaging the capacity to perceive hidden similarities but also involving magic, imitation, disguise, destruction and the reconstruction of the world, as well as all the other significant dimensions of play. This is also the power that creates the polarity between semblance and play, the polarity which, according to the second version of "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility", is at the core of every artistic manifestation.[18]

14 *Idem*, "On Astrology", in *SW*, vol. 2, p. 684.

15 *Idem*, "Doctrine of the Similar", *SW*, vol. 2, pp. 684–698.

16 *Idem*, *The Arcades Project*, [Q°24], p. 868.

17 HANSEN, M. B., *op. cit.*, p. 155.

18 BENJAMIN, W., "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (second version), *SW*, vol. 3, n. 22, p. 127.

Making room

"The destructive character knows only one watchword: make room [Platz schaffen]. And only one activity: clearing away [räumen]. His need for fresh air and open space [freiem Raum] is stronger than any hatred."[19]

This section from text "The Destructive Character", published in 1931 in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, will guide us through one of the most important features – even though not always explicit – of Benjamin's thinking on photography: the relation between destruction and the liberating gesture of making room. This relation provides a conceptual framework for the understanding of the historical and aesthetical transformations brought forth by photography (and by extension by cinema).

Although "The Destructive Character" was inspired by the figure of Gustav Glück, the director of the foreign division of the National Credit and a close friend of Benjamin at the time[20], it also contains elements that illuminate an important dimension of Benjamin's thinking. The movement of destruction – and construction as its counterpart – can be identified in several moments of his *oeuvre*. In fact, an important part of his historical method comprises the assessing of the losses and gains that take place in a particular historical period. The destruction of tradition, signifying the loss of the experiences that characterize a given epoch, establishes a tension with the new possibilities of experience thus created. It is from the heart of these tensions that Benjamin's historical and critical thinking unfolds. Hence the relation that the *"destructive character"* has with the historical consciousness: *"The destructive character has the consciousness of historical man, whose deepest emotion is an insuperable mistrust of the course of things and a readiness at all times to recognize that everything can go wrong. Therefore, the destructive character is reliability itself"*[21]. Playing with the opposition between mistrust and reliability, Benjamin identifies the importance of the destructive character for a certain kind of historical man. But the path he reserves for this reliability is in fact close to the characteristics he predicates for the materialist historian.

The sections of *Das Passagen-Werk* assembled under the letter N are the ones which better explain the theoretical background of this unfinished project. A few of them point out the importance of the destructive element in the task of the materialist historian: *"It is important for the materialist historian, in the most rigorous way possible, to differentiate the construction of a historical state of affairs from what one customarily calls its 'reconstruction'. The 'reconstruction' in empathy is one-dimensional. 'Construction' presupposes 'destruction'"*[22]. The task Benjamin assigns to destruction is part of his critical position against the principles of historicism. More specifically, by criticizing the idea of 'reconstruction' of the past, he is stressing the importance of the present as, simultaneously, a condition for legibility and a transformation of that same past. The destructive or critical moment

19 *dem*, "The Destructive Character", *SW*, vol. 2, p. 541.
20 *Idem*, "Letter to Gerhard Scholem, October 28, 1931", in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, p. 386.
21 *Idem*, "The Destructive Character", p. 542.
22 *dem*, *The Arcades Project*, [N7, 6], p. 470.

occurs with the blasting of the historical continuity in which the historical facts are presented.[23] By the same token, the text "Eduard Fuchs. Collector and historian" comprises the critique of a cultural history based on the accumulation of facts in a temporal continuum. Benjamin stands for the dialectic thought exactly because of its capacity to grasp the destructive elements in culture: "*For cultural history lacks the destructive element which authenticates both dialectical thought and the experience of the dialectical thinker. It may augment the weight of the treasure accumulating on the back of humanity, but it does not provide the strength to shake off this burden so as to take control of it*"[24].

In order to overcome the illusion of progress one has to expose its breaches, bringing to light, for instance, that technology is not just a scientific achievement aiming the improvement of living conditions. It also offers its services to the production of commodities according to capitalist demands. And, more dramatically, technology is a servant of violent forces, in particular the ones related to war. By pointing out the hidden and destructive elements in technology, Benjamin creates an interruption and thus promotes a thoroughly confrontation between the present and the past, liberating the objects for new reading possibilities.

Broadly speaking, we can assume that the idea of destruction means "*the destruction of some false or deceptive form of experience as the productive condition of the construction of a new relation to the object*"[25]. And this idea permeates Benjamin's writings on photography. Making room is thus a gesture that allows for the possibility of exploring the dimensions virtually contained in the photographic apparatus. As we have already seen, these possibilities should not be understood according to the traditional categories of art, precisely because they encompass new forms – scientific, physiognomic or political – and new relations between knowledge, art and technology.

Blossfeldt's photographs are part of a process that widens our perception by showing a previously veiled world. The notion of optical unconscious tries to grasp this movement. Let us now focus on the fundamental role the photographer Atget plays in the economy of Benjamin's reading of photography.

Besides being ground-breaking, Atget's photographs also show an intimate relation between the photographer and the technology at his disposal. Throughout his patient and meticulous work, he was capable of clearing away the atmosphere of photography, by exploring a forgotten Paris.

> He 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 most signal achievement of the latest school of photography. [...] He looked for what was unremarked, forgotten, cast adrift. And thus such pictures, too, work against the exotic, romantically sonorous names of the cities; they suck the

23 *Idem*, *ibidem*, [N10a, 1], p. 475.

24 *Idem*, "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian", *SW*, vol. 3, p. 268.

25 BENJAMIN, A. and OSBORNE, P. (ed.), *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy. Destruction and Experience*, p. xi.

> aura out of reality like water from a sinking ship.[26]

The subsequent passage of the text gives a first definition of aura – in this text, but also in Benjamin's *oeuvre*: *"What is aura, actually? A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be"*[27].

Benjamin is not always clear on the relations between the transformations regarding the aura and the periods of decay in the history of photography. The spatio-temporal structure of the aura is broad, while the different occurrences in the text often comprise specific phenomena: the aura of certain gazes, the technical conditionings of the auratic phenomena, the attempt to create an artificial aura trough the retouching of photographs. Though it is possible to gather the different definitions of aura in this and in other texts, though the aura is a key-notion in the texts on Baudelaire and in the well-known essay "The work of art in the age of its reproducibility", the truth is that it does not correspond to a stabilized concept. It reflects the inner movement of Benjamin's thought, maintaining the respect for the singularity of each phenomena and the attempt to revitalize its historical content.

In order to further progress on the question of aura and its relation with photography (a comprehensive development is not in our scope), two remarks are necessary.

First, when Benjamin highlights the spatio-temporal dialectics of Dauthendey's photograph (which is a quality of photography in general, derived from its optical, chemical or nowadays electronic nature), it seems to match one of the determinations of the aura: *"the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be."* Reproducibility, which tends to destroy the qualities of uniqueness and duration of the original image, weakens this trait, but the spark of reality is always exercising its strength. If we consider this temporal dimension of the aura as a virtual property of photography, it becomes easier to understand it from an historical perspective. However, the logic of causality is of little use here. In its place, we should think from a perspective of irradiations, ramifications or disseminations. Just like the relation between magic and technology, so the difference between aura and reproducibility follows a historical variant. Benjamin himself does not consider this "alternative" way of conceiving the photographic aura but it is a plausible path in which to develop and detour his concepts.

Second, in a protocol written in March 1930 about his experiences with hashish, Benjamin gives a different and perhaps a sharper definition of aura. Against the theosophists and the conventional and banal ideas on the subject, he puts forwards a definition based on three points:

> First, genuine aura appears in all things [...]. Second, the aura undergoes changes, which can be quite fundamental, with every movement the aura-wreathed object makes. Third, genuine aura can in no sense be thought of as a spruced-up version of the magic rays beloved of spiritualists and described and illustrated in vulgar works of mysticism. On the contrary the characteristic

26 BENJAMIN, W., "Little History of Photography", p. 518.
27 *Idem*, *ibidem*.

> feature of genuine aura is ornament, an ornamental halo, in which the object or being is enclosed as in a case.[28]

Taking into account these two remarks, we can thus conclude that in "Little History of Photography" the main concern is not the complete disappearance of aura, but an understanding of its transformations regarding specific photographic experiences.

Let us now come back to Atget. According to Benjamin, his photographs clean the asphyxiating atmosphere created by the portraits of the epoch, as well as the romanticized and stereotyped images of the cities. This cleaning also means the destruction of the aura, a first step towards "*the emancipation of object from aura, which is the most signal achievement of the latest school of photography*"[29]. By depicting an almost empty city of Paris, by showing the hidden details, Atget was anticipating surrealist photography. From the point of view of a more conventional history of photography, it is debatable to regard Atget as a forerunner of surrealist photography. But certainly not by chance, Rosalind Krauss stresses the importance of "spacing" in photographic surrealism, since it paradoxically destroys the unity of the photographed reality, making it clear that "*we are not looking at reality, but at the world infested by interpretation or signification, which is to say, reality distended by the gaps or blanks which are the formal preconditions of the sign*"[30]. Though the theoretical framework that Krauss develops in her study on surrealism goes way beyond the Benjaminian influence, the notion of "spacing" seems to dialogue implicitly with the different levels of the movement of destruction/construction that we are trying to follow.

Only remotely do Atget's photographs [Fig. 2] seem to fulfil the sophistication of *avant-garde* and modernist demands. If Benjamin brings them together, it is because those photographs have a liberating power. Somehow, while depicting a hidden city, they form a strange threshold. It is clear that the Benjaminian analysis is concerned with the aesthetical and political consequences of that strangeness:

> 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 [*Sie macht dem politisch geschulten Blick das Feld frei*], under whose gaze all intimacies are sacrificed to the illumination of detail.[31]

The English translation of this last sentence accentuates the dimension of play. But more literally *das Feld frei machen* alludes to a "liberated space". In fact, space and freedom belong to a kindred semantic field, a fact also recognizable in another German word we will consider in what follows,

28 BENJAMIN, W., "Hashish, Beginning of March", *SW*, vol. 2, pp. 326–327.
29 *Idem*, "Little History of Photography", p. 518.
30 KRAUSS, R., "Photographic Conditions of Surrealism", in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, p. 107.
31 BENJAMIN, W., "Little History of Photography", p. 519.

Spielraum. By sucking the aura of reality, by shedding the ornaments of the objects, photography can make room for a further development of our perception, a movement analogous to the one described in the "The Destructive Character".

Emptiness can be seen as a twofold political gesture: from the beginning it is an attack against the business of photography, especially portrait photography (although Atget often sold his photographs to painters); but it also broadens our freedom through the possibility of exploring space. The illumination of details is intrinsically connected to these two gestures.[32] Contributing to the widening of spatial dimensions as a political action, Atget can be said to belong to a group of photographers from the first decades of the twentieth century that explore the potential of the photographic medium. In this sense, it is worth mentioning Benjamin's reference to Nadar in the "Exposé of 1935" for *The Arcades Project*. Commenting on the dissemination of photography and on its technological and social aspects, he mentions Nadar superiority towards his colleagues because of his photographs of the Paris sewer system. For the first time, *"the lens was deemed capable of making discoveries"*[33]. In this sense, Nadar photographs of the Paris sewer system have a political quality and can be seen as an "underground" predecessor of Atget's ones.

The procedure of montage also involves a specific relation between destruction and space. This procedure became usual due to the development of technologies such as photography, cinema, radio or press. Benjamin associates montage to the principle of interruption that he identifies in Brecht's epic theatre[34] and he himself practiced a sort of literary montage while writing *One Way Street*. From the point of view of history, not only did he pointed out the destructive character of interruption, but he also applied it in *Das Passagen-Werk*, conceiving a project meant to be developed on quotations and small remarks. Independently of the future Benjamin reserved for the work on the Parisian arcades, the interruption-destruction that clears away entails a new relation with history and new political possibilities.

Space is obviously an essential element for architecture. Benjamin's writings deal explicitly with architecture in at least two different ways. The first one, in the context of "The Work of Art" essay, involves the distinction between tactile and optical reception. The tactile reception, coming about by the way of habit, is fundamental for architecture. It offers insights into the problem of reception in a state of distraction, which is the state of reception predominant for the masses. The second one, impossible to delineate in few words, concerns the different levels displayed in *Das Passagen-Werk*. For instance, the ambiguous and dialectical polarity between the interior and the exterior of the Parisian arcades is a model for the dialectical images and for the whole ambiguity of modernity. Besides these two wide-ranging approaches, the gesture of "making room" in its relation with architecture is explicitly developed in two "thought images", curiously about two Mediterranean

32 On the importance of the photographic detail (in its relation with other aspects of the detail in Benjamin's thought, cf. WEIGEL, S., "Detail – Photographic and Cinematographic Images", in *Walter Benjamin: Images, the Creaturely, and the Holy*, pp. 235-266.
33 BENJAMIN, W., "Exposé of 1935", in *The Arcades Project*, p. 6.
34 *Idem*, "The Author as Producer", *SW*, vol. 2, p. 778.

[Fig. 2]

EUGÈNE ATGET
Rue Cardinale, 1922, Albumen silver print
17.9 × 21.9 cm (7 1/16 × 8 5/8 in.)
The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

places, Naples and Ibiza. In both, the notion of *Spielraum* is crucial.

Naples. While describing the grey qualities of the stone that dominates the city and the caves hewn in it, Benjamin says: *"as porous as this stone is the architecture. Building and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades and stairways. In everything, they preserve the scope [Spielraum] to become a theatre of new, unforeseen constellations. The stamp of the definitive is avoided."*[35]

Ibiza. The text is called "Space for Precious Objects" and it is a description of the precious objects Benjamin found in the houses of Southern Spain. Their preciousness, though, derives not from their economic value but from their sobriety, the austerity of the living space they inhabit. The important thing is not the spot they belong to, but the space that allows them to take new positions and acquire new functions. *"Fisherman's nets and copper kettles, rudders and clay jars, come together and are ready, as the need arises, to change places and form new combinations a hundred times a day"*[36]. Benjamin also underlines the simplicity of these houses, contrasting the experience they furnish with his own bourgeois experience: *"in our well-appointed houses, however, there is no space for precious objects, because there is no scope [Spielraum] for their service"*[37].

Both passages express the dynamic possibility of relocation, one of situations, the other of objects. The first, referring to the macroscopic dimension, the exteriors of Naples, concerns what is unexpected in people's actions, thus accounting for the plastic and anarchic characteristics of the city. The second, referring to the microscopic description of the village houses in Southern Spain, concerns the sobriety and functionality of objects. *Spielraum* is, nevertheless, the condition for both. Room for play, for the freedom of movement, room for manoeuver: different meanings for a German word that captures the rich semantic fields of play (*Spiel*) and space (*Raum*).

The element of play constitutes an important dimension of mimesis. In the second version of "The Work of Art" essay, Benjamin develops a distinction between the first and the second technologies. Photography and cinema flourish within the historical period covered by the second technology. Mimesis, and its inner polarity between semblance and play, is conceived as the *Urphänemon* of all the artistic activity. For Benjamin, the passage from the first to the second technology implies the decreasing of beautiful semblance (of the *"object in its veil"* – in this text, an equivalent to aura). This decreasing "is matched by a huge gain in the scope for play [*Spiel-raum*]"[38]. According to this analysis, which is also a utopian projection on the future of art, cinema is in a privileged situation. Before describing the characteristics of the optical unconscious, as well as the technical components – close-up, slow motion or enlargement – that are revealed in cinema, once again Benjamin makes use of the dialectic ideas of destruction and *Spielraum*:

> On the one hand, [cinema] furthers insight into the necessities governing our lives by its use

35 *Idem*, "Naples", *SW*, vol. 1, p. 416

36 *Idem*, "Space for Precious Objects", in "Ibizan Sequence", *SW*, vol. 2, p. 589.

37 *Idem*, *ibidem*.

38 *Idem*, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (second version), n. 22, p. 127.

> of close-ups, by its accentuation of hidden details in familiar objects, and by its exploration of commonplace milieu through the ingenious guidance of the camera; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of a vast and unsuspected field of action [*Spielraum*].
>
> Our bars and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories seemed to close relentlessly around us. Then came film and exploded this prison-world with the dynamite of the split second, so that now we can set off calmly on journeys of adventure among its far-flung debris.[39]

The process of destruction leads to the creation of a free scope which, however, is not an absolute emptiness. Finding room for *manoeuvre* inside complex situations is perhaps the best translation of this movement. It allows the reconstruction of the world with the debris (and the image of the debris is recurrent in Benjamin's thought). There is also a utopian element here which is characteristic of the second technology. In the essay, this utopian element is illustrated by the image of the child who has learned to grasp and stretches out his hand for the moon as he would do for a ball.[40] This movement, whose revolutionary goal demands a collective innervation, is only possible because a new scope for play was created.[41] Whether Benjamin's social and political prognostics regarding cinema were confirmed by the development of the media is perhaps less important than the historical and critical thinking he sets the basis for. In his time, and without disregarding the constellation of dangers surrounding him, he was capable of discovering the historical moments in which the veils were being shed, in which destruction was opening space. His confrontation with specific photographic works such as Blossfeldt's and Atget's were important steps towards the revelation of the tensions of his present. Searching, or even creating these tensions, is still a possibility in our present time.

39 *Idem*, *ibidem*, p. 117.

40 *Idem*, *ibidem*, n. 10, p. 124.

41 For a transposition of Benjamin's ideas on cinema to architecture, see MORGAN, D., "*Spielraum* et *Greifbarkeit*: un acheminement vers une architecture utopique", in ANDREOTTI, L., Spielraum*: W. Benjamin et L'architecture*, pp. 291–301.

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