

Benjamin's Baudelaire: Time and Timeless Photography

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Abstract: Walter Benjamin's accounts and imaginings of Baudelaire are multiple and extensive. Baudelaire's method and manner of dealing with the world for Benjamin allows him to reveal the structures and mechanisms that constitute modern society. By linking Baudelaire's way of working to the process of photography, I explore how Benjamin constructs a relationship between Baudelaire, time and photography, and how these ideas are revealing themselves in modern photography in networked environments.

Time: Earthly and Timeless

Walter Benjamin's analysis of Charles Baudelaire's writings is prolific, and spans the whole of his philosophical career.¹ What I will be making an analysis of here is a specific fragment of writing of Benjamin's, simply called "Baudelaire II", which uses the metaphor of photography to "characterise Baudelaire's way of looking at the world"². It is in this small text that time also becomes an important player in the framework of modernity, as Benjamin paints (or develops) a picture of Baudelaire not as the last of the romantics, able to "distill" from modern life the particular stories of artists and individuals, but instead Benjamin's Baudelaire is a modern character who has an understanding of "prehistory"; that which is outside history, and even outside time.³ With such

¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, trans. Howard Eiland (Massachusetts: Harvard University, 2006), although it is not limited to this collection, as Baudelaire is referenced (directly or indirectly) in many of Benjamin's writings. See also Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 2002)

² Walter Benjamin, "Baudelaire" in *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, trans. Howard Eiland (Massachusetts: Harvard University, 2006), 27. These two paragraphs are previously unpublished fragments of writing thought to have been preliminary notes from a talk he delivered in 1922 on the poet.

³ Michael W. Jennings, "Introduction" in *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, trans. Howard Eiland (Massachusetts: Harvard University, 2006), 7

knowledge in his possession, Baudelaire himself becomes timeless; his writings always able to produce some relevance to whichever time may encounter and read them. In a society of commodification and modernity, Baudelaire's imagery and poetics retain a certain poignancy and relevance.

In order to start his analysis of Baudelaire in this text, Benjamin first brings Baudelaire in relation to time:

Let us compare time to a photographer – earthly time to a photographer who photographs the essence of things. But because of the nature of earthly time and its apparatus, the photographer manages only to register the negative of that essence on his photographic plates.⁴

Benjamin is giving time the role of the photographer: Time must capture something of what it encounters, it picks up those moments it deems important or significant, and produces a document of it, granting that moment "timelessness" within time's own ever changing system. "Earthly time" is time as we experience it: Always pushing on without discrimination, and yet still it picks up moments, incorporates them as they pass through it, and so assembles them into a history or chronology; Not one that is linear and straightforward, but one which is relative, changing, and shifting in and out of focus. How else could we have the "little moments" that make one's day, or the "moment of truth" that would define us if time was not earthly – if it could not assemble and bring what happens to and around us into focus and coherence every so often?

The photographer, being an earthly figure, must always inhabit the same world as these moments and at the same *time* as they happen; whether the photographer is seeking them out intentionally, or they are simply in the wrong place at the right time. The photographer which Benjamin describes could be seen as a neutral party, an onlooker to the world as it turns, but in reality they are in no such privileged position, and are never *safe* in this regard. Earthly time as this photographer must have its limit: No matter how powerful or technologically advanced their

⁴ Walter Benjamin, "Baudelaire", 27

apparatus may be, it can never capture this “essence of things”; these moments and objects that shape and constitute the world. The negatives this apparatus instead creates are a very particular and peculiar objects themselves: They have a quality of their own, as they are tangible to the senses in their own right, and in this state of the negative they don’t act as representations at all, as they cannot be “read” or speak of what they supposedly captured. At the time of Benjamin’s writing, the state of photography was such that a photographic plate or negative would have to go through the traditional lengthy process that would involve immersing the negative in special fluids, and a waiting for it to develop, all the while the moment it supposedly captures moves further away in a linear-temporal sense. But even after this process, and the object of the photograph has been completed, the moment it aimed to capture still eludes it. It is a representation that recreates a moment, which it in fact never captured in the first instance.⁵

Presenting Essence

So if representation cannot capture “the true essence of things as they are” is there a non-representational process that can do so?⁶ For Benjamin, this is where Baudelaire makes his mark: He does not possess the so-called “magical fluid” or elixir that allows a capturing of things as they are either, but what he can do is read the negatives he possesses, and from these negatives themselves, he can read and lay bare the societal, political and economic mechanism of his age. Benjamin does not equate Baudelaire with a photographer. Indeed, ***Baudelaire is not interested in creating a photograph***, and according to Benjamin, what he possesses is not a kind of technical (or technological) expertise, but instead Benjamin credits Baudelaire’s ability to his “infinite mental efforts”. The negative of the essence is inscribed on a plate, and the means to re-present this

⁵ This is an idea that appears in Benjamin’s essay *Task of the Translator* (1923), in which he remarks how a literal translation will have difficulty in capturing the true essence of the original text, and that care must be taken in finding ways to preserve the “life of the originals” within them. See Walter Benjamin, “Task of the Translator” in *Walter Benjamin: Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 2007), 71

⁶ Benjamin, “Baudelaire”, 27

essence from this state are not available, but Baudelaire has found a way to take from these negatives what they were never able to capture, something which the fluids of the development process will clean or burn away, leaving a presentation of a moment that does not capture the real picture (so to speak), and these other sides to a moment are the price one must pay in order for the photograph to become readable⁷. Baudelaire's writings are underlined by "the old idea that knowledge is guilt", and as Adam was cast out of Eden for wanting to go beyond knowledge of the world as he knew it, so is Baudelaire too not satisfied with knowledge, and "wanted to know its good and evil side as well".⁸ Baudelaire cannot be a photographer of Benjamin's era; a photographer who is detached and distant to what he intends to capture, one who is placed firmly behind his lens, or locked in their dark room with their negatives, the pristine conditions, and the knowledge to develop their negatives: Baudelaire is aware that knowledge alone and taking oneself out of the picture is not the way to capture the essence of things as they are at that moment; one must be able to be moved by that moment; to allow oneself to be swayed by either the good or evil present in the metropolitan crowd at any given moment: To spend the day being moved by the beauty of the classical art in the Louvre, but also to be seduced by the Parisian prostitute on the way home at night. It is only through this immersion in both can he find what he *needs*, to write what he *reads* from these negative plates.

Presenting Photography: A Shared Experience

Does contemporary photography incorporate a different usage of time that allows it to move beyond representation? While the traditional photographer was set up outside of his own

⁷ It is again important to note how time acts as the photographer, and Baudelaire himself does not. Time lays out its negatives in their unreadable state, and the process via which they become readable (their development in the dark room) makes the resulting photograph present itself, but without the essence of what constituted this. Benjamin sees Baudelaire as able to bypass the method time has laid down before us and able to find his own way to make these negatives readable to the senses (in the forms of his writing and poetry) which does not lose those aspects of a moment which cannot be represented.

⁸ Benjamin, "Baudelaire", 27

frame or lens, and was to act as a neutral party, photography, while still its own medium and area of expertise, is much more fully integrated into everyday life, with a lens implanted in every smartphone or mobile device. The instant something happens, there is a lens in proximity, and a natural reaction to something memorable or something worth highlighting is to capture it. Photography in this sense is not about waiting in time to set up the perfect shot, but for the photograph to capture whatever and whenever something arrests a person's attention. The earthly time that is also a photographer has become less removed from that which is attempting to capture, no longer removing itself into the dark room and taking itself *out of time* in order to develop a picture. The photographer (or user) is connected to their lens, and the lens itself is very much a part of a moment, it being natural and incidental to take a photograph of anything one deems to be noteworthy. Of course, such photography places the user at the core of their photographs; the "subject" of such pictures have little relevance unless we know who took it or why. Photography cannot be thought of as simply an act of representation in this respect; they are concurrent with moments as and when they happen, caught in the everydayness and essence of modernity, in between the individuality of the photographer, and the commodities which surround and define them; much like Baudelaire as he is caught up in the turmoil of everyday modernity: both pleasurable and painful, and both essential for living.

Though photography in this sense starts to generate a picture and a comment of the character of an age, it would be erroneous to say it *represents* an age⁹. As I have mentioned, the photograph is always connected to the photographer, and the lens shares the moment with its owner; to think of the lens of the cornea and the lens of the camera taking two different pictures in this context would cause the photograph to move into the arena of representation; but that is not how the camera operates if one is moving through their everyday life and decides to take a photograph with their smartphone or other device. Perhaps one could think of the camera as an

⁹ This however, is not to say that a photograph cannot *define* an age in some respects. Some photographs may gain notoriety through these methods of dissemination, and allow us to step back and question, whereby we may utter a phrase such as "Are these the times we live in?" or "This captures the *spirit* of the movement".

augmented eye, through which others may join in the experience of one's everyday occurrences via a networked society such as that in which we live, using timestamps, and various metadata to cite it not historically (representationally), but as a product and presence inseparable from its moment.

While photography as Baudelaire (and Benjamin) knew it was a tool of documentation and preservation, it was not a particularly viable medium of capturing the essence of experience of modernity in mid-19th Century cities: It captured the immovable subject, the face (and fashion) of the modern world as its subject wished to be captured, seen and remembered by others.

Photography as we know it today is not confined to a studio or burdened by large equipment as I have mentioned; instead, the subject is mobile, free to move with their lens at will. A photograph taken in this liberated state, to be instantly disseminated takes on a very different life: It captures a happening, a trend, a point of interest, but it is not immovable, and must not be. There is immediacy in the staging of the photograph, and there is something that *must* be caught in that moment in time to be shared. This immediacy also brings with it limited relevance, the picture may capture a moment, but it will be pushed down a news feed in favour of another, and so becomes less and less relevant. This however, is not a bad thing, for a photograph in this sense must not be permanent; it comes and goes with the trends that make up an economy of hash-tags and metadata. When it has been disseminated, the photograph will take on increasing and decreasing relevance dependent on the popularity of either the person who took the photo, or what the photo is capturing. When it has lost its relevance, it is not in the public eye, not discussed, not seen. The *forgetting* of the photograph when it has waned from interest, or has become an object simply to invoke a memory, is a part of a life-cycle that the photograph has in a social networking context.¹⁰

¹⁰ Photography in such contexts brings up a new conflict in dealing with Baudelaire here. While art must play its role in modernity, his attitude for the public was that they would not appreciate what was before them, and they would remain unaware of modernity's doubling of good and evil which must be captured in art. One of the most powerful aspects of how we use photography today is its ability to capture and share experiences as and when they happen; but at the same time, one can become detached from those experiences to focus on capturing a moment rather than inhabiting it. My own stance on this is that while there is a point to be made that one can observe life merely from the other side of a lens; making life a strange representation of itself, it

The status of the photograph is now left in an odd place in time: The moment it was a part of is now past, but the photograph still remains, and with it an essence of this moment. These photographs act as a reminder of a slice of time in which something was relevant and of interest, which is something that Baudelaire was so adamant that art must do in the face of modernity.¹¹ Such photographs can remind us of happier times, or they can haunt us of terrible mistakes, and whether good or bad, they capture life as it is lived.

Timelessness

To Benjamin, one of the key reasons why Baudelaire was such an important figure was this “timelessness” I mentioned at the beginning of this article. It is Baudelaire’s ability to look at time in a different manner; to be affected by its movements, and to inhabit its moments, but he could simultaneously look at these things outside time, and reveal them in his writing from this position. To take a stance on something, to capture the experience of modernity, one must see as Baudelaire does; to be able to look at things not just with knowledge, but with good and evil, the classic and modern art, the courtesan and the prostitute, all of which being entangled in a non-binary relation, but each being able to penetrate and contribute to one’s lifestyle. For Benjamin, This is what made Baudelaire able to have political agency, despite not intentionally being political, Benjamin believed his work is something that must in fact *be* understood politically to have this timelessness¹². Likewise, photography can be framed as simultaneously inhabiting the earthly time of the world, and also as existing outside of such time, in a networked system, a digital archive; where the photograph is a slice or segment of time, but it is never cut from its connections to other photographs, to text, to

also gives one the opportunity to transgress borders and limits, re-imagining time and distances to allow one to remain connected to those people and trends that are important to them.

¹¹ Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life” in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Maine (London: Phaidon, 1995), 13

¹² To get into the Benjamin’s politics is far too vast of a subject for this article, and would move us away from the analysis of time and photography. It is far too important however, to not mention, so this brief passage must suffice.

videos and so forth.¹³ In this duality of earthly time and timelessness, photography opens one up to just what it is that allowed Baudelaire to deal with the world around him, although perhaps we are no closer to realising what Benjamin meant by Baudelaire's "infinite mental efforts" to do so.¹⁴ In turn, this sharing of the image also requires one to take a position on something, and that position is to be seen by others. This leads to a person via their photographic image being *exposed* to others: Not just an exposure to light or radiation, but to other images, agencies, users, all connected together to share a moment or happening that resonates via the image.¹⁵

Conclusion

Through photography, one can perhaps find the reason why Baudelaire was such an important figure for Benjamin. The camera won't turn one into a Baudelairean figure, able to work out just what it is that makes the world in one's own little moment tick and to capture it in writing or a picture; but what modern photography does with its accessibility and connectivity is open up the possibilities to grasp some of what we encounter, whether ordinary or extra-ordinary, to realise we do not just live in a world of representations, objects, subjects and commodities, but the lens of the camera gives one an eye to see how these things are situated relatively to ourselves and our own positions, and through this, one can hope to gain some sense and agency in the world (politically or

¹³ See Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography" in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eliand and Others, 274-298

¹⁴ The most important realisation to take away from this phrase would seem to be that, as mentioned, what Baudelaire achieved was not of a technical expertise or technological construction, but there was something about him as a person who lived in this time and in the way he lived: As this flâneur, or dandy figure among the crowds of the bustling metropolis of Paris, and through his mixing with the good and bad of all lifestyles and classes, he could utilise his efforts to lay out what he saw as the character of his age (and any age, such as our own, that has a focus on commodification)

¹⁵ It is also worthwhile thinking about exposure as it is used in a magic act: the term "exposure" is used to define when the secret of a magician's trick is revealed. As referenced earlier, Benjamin considered Baudelaire's significance in being able to lay out (or expose) the naked mechanisms of an age: Good, evil, sex, death and all. Equating these notions of exposure, we can start to see how Baudelaire is revealing the secrets of modernity via his own process: He is not performing the "trick" of making an image appear out of the negative, but he is showing how this illusion is able to deceive and captivate us, and revealing all of the dirty secrets behind the curtain that the magician does not allow you to see.

otherwise), and also a better sense of ownership of one's time; being able to determine what is important, what to point one's lens at, and how our life experiences can be remembered and shared with others. Photography as we now know it is establishing a framework that allows one to take stock and reveal the political, societal and economic systems that make up the world we are experiencing, not just as a self, but among many who are also part of this earthly experience. Benjamin's Baudelaire can serve as an example of someone who can see beyond the image of the photograph, and is instead able to employ a different methodology to put said image into relation with the world that captures not just the virtuous and depravity that constitutes it, but also how they are at work within what we subject our lenses to, and if necessary, how we can start to think differently about them.

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