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Photography Sets The Image Free: Inaugural Professorial Lecture

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Michelle Henning Inaugural Professorial Lecture
Unpublished transcript.

Photography Sets the Image Free¹

Thankyou all for coming, it's so lovely to see you here. It means a lot to me. I have been told different things about inaugural lectures by friends: to speak about the direction of my own research and how I came to my current research projects, to acknowledge influences, to talk about my teenage passions (!) I might subtly do a little bit of the last two, but mainly, I plan to talk about something which is an enduring passion of mine, the writing of the early-twentieth century critic Walter Benjamin. For those of you who haven't heard of him, he was German, Jewish and Marxist and his most significant writing was produced in the period from 1920 until his death in 1940. I am not so much talking about Benjamin as talking about photography through and with him. I am also going to talk a bit about concepts of freedom.

This is because, when I was thinking about inaugural lectures, and what they are and what they are for, I began to think about what my own investment is in being an artist and an academic, in making and studying. For me, when I was growing up as a girl, reading and making were a means to escape a certain kind of horribly limiting self-consciousness that feminist theorists have described since the 1920s.² Instead of acting in the world, we watch ourselves acting, we critique our own appearances, we catch our reflections in shop windows, we ask anxiously for reassurance about our performance in a lecture. To become a woman is to watch ourselves being watched, but when I read or draw, I can forget myself, when I take photographs, I watch everything but myself (most of the time anyway). This is going to sound corny, but I think my own personal investment is that in making and study, I find small ways to be free. This idea of freedom is about something the media theorist Vilém Flusser's calls "that disregard of self, that absorption in work", that destroys the distinction between work and play.³

¹ This is the transcript of a public lecture. It is addressed to a wide audience, and so some arguments are made as accessible as I could manage, hopefully without too much simplification. The case it makes for academia as a space for a certain kind of freedom is made in the context of specific changes in British higher education, and of my own career, and is not intended as a generalized defence of a Kantian ideal of the university.

² For example see Rivière, "Womanliness as Masquerade", Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 46-7, Doane, "Misrecognition and Identity".

³ Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, 95.

Perhaps it is no coincidence, then, that I am so keen to make the argument that photography unfixes things, that it sets the image free. But I also want to talk about photography and freedom for reasons that are not just personal. As an academic and an artist I am also interested in ideas of artistic and academic freedom. I am conscious that I am speaking when many of my colleagues in other institutions are on strike over changes to their pension scheme, and that many of us view this as a dispute that is not just about pensions but about the value placed on education and on academia. So, here I want to address the value of these practices, not their value as instruments in the service of industry, social policy and profit, but an aspect of their bigger value, which is the way in which they allow all of us to cultivate certain ways of thinking and being.

So, I am going to talk about photography, and about Benjamin, and I am going to show you photographs. Through the lecture I hope you will also get a sense of why I do this kind of research. Knowing that you all come from all sorts of different backgrounds, with different kinds of expertise, I am going to try to take you with me through something I find hard to think about and which therefore, I think is worth thinking about. It is fine if you don't get the sense of a fully coherent argument, but leave the room with thoughts of Epicurean Gods, of stars that penetrate telescopes and fossils that look at us, of Scottish shawls and silver nitrate, of poisoned blood and Napoleonic wars, of photographing pigeons and hollow-boned aliens.

This lecture is going to centre around unravelling one phrase in Walter Benjamin's 1931 essay which is called "Little History of Photography", or "A Small History of Photography", depending on which translation you are using. And the phrase I am going to focus on is here in German and in a couple of different translations below: "light wrests itself agonisingly from the darkness", or "light separates itself reluctantly from shadow". It's a phrase he uses to describe the 1840s images by Scots photographers David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson (though like other writers at the time, Benjamin credits these photographs entirely to Hill, pictured here in a photograph by Adamson).

So, taking this phrase as a starting point, I am aiming to move us away from the conventional ways of talking about what happens when a photograph is taken. Away from the language of capture and stalking, of snapping and shooting and taking a photograph; away too, from the idea of taking a photograph as a "soft murder" (which is what Susan Sontag called it) and

away from ideas about the photograph as fact, evidence, and even, as representation.⁴ All of these ideas are associated with the common-sense understanding of photography as a static medium that “freezes” the moment. This characterisation privileges certain kinds of practice, drawing a sharp distinction between photography and moving-image media such as film and video. It imagines the photograph as primarily a print, and it underpins arguments about how new or different digital images are.

Against this, I take the view that what photography does is set the image free. By images I don't just mean pictures, that is, I am not just thinking of photography as a means of reproduction. As you know the category of images can include literary images, and mental images. Images in this sense are not necessary substantial material things. Photography, both chemical and digital, allows images to be projected, reproduced and transmitted. It unhooks images from one specific surface, material or ground and from their fixed place in time and space, and allows them to multiply and to wander, and our imaginations to wander with them. In multiplying images, some writers have argued that photography expands and extends the imagination, providing us with a larger, more diverse repertoire of images in our minds. (This is the kind of unfettering of the image that I talk about in my new book).⁵

But photography also sets the image free in another way, which is what I will be talking about tonight. I am discussing analogies between the technology of photography and the capacity of thinking. Through its technical process, photography seems to bring image making closer to thought. Flusser, who I mentioned earlier, described photography as a technology for “envisioning”, because the photograph arrives all at once, more like an idea than, say, a drawing.⁶ He compared philosophy and photography, suggesting that there was something about the act of taking a photograph that brings it close to the process of philosophizing.⁷ And Benjamin seems to draw a similar analogy, suggesting that photography can be a technical equivalent for thinking. He finds this in instantaneous photography, which appears in a sudden flash, like wit or inspiration; but also, and mainly, in early chemical photographs, such as Hill and Adamson's, which register slowly like reflective thought.

⁴ Sontag, *On Photography*, 15.

⁵ Henning, *Photography: The Unfettered Image*.

⁶ Flusser, *Into The Universe of Technical Images*, 19-21.

⁷ Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, particularly the final chapter.

The ability of these early photographs to do what I am calling “setting the image free” and what Benjamin saw as a technical equivalent to reflective thinking, rests on long-exposure times and poor sensitivity (of lenses and plates). By early photographs, I mean photographs produced in only two decades: between 1839 when for most photographers it was almost impossible to register the human face without it being more than a blurred trace, and the 1860s when instantaneous photography arrived, with increased photosensitivity of emulsions, fast lenses and mechanised shutters. This narrow historical moment between 1839 and 1860 also brought dramatic social and economic changes in Europe, particularly transformations in the social classes, and it laid the ground for modern industrial and commodity capitalism.

As you may know, photography in the 1840s and 1850s was not a medium of mass reproduction. The daguerreotype, the first viable photographic process, was completely un-reproducible, a miracle of chemistry on metal. William Henry Fox Talbot’s groundbreaking book of photographs, *The Pencil of Nature*, used the paper process that he invented, and was printed in a limited edition in the 1840s. As photography historians have shown, the process was laborious and the prints themselves were unstable and prone to fading — indeed only about 15 copies of the entire book still exist.⁸

Although even then, photography held out the promise of mass reproduction, for Benjamin the photographs from this period are interesting for a different reason. As Benjamin argues across several writings, technological modernity and the rise of a new form of global free trade capitalism dramatically alters the nature of experience, increasingly challenging our ability to assimilate experiences — the things that happen to us — into a larger sense of experience as know-how.⁹

Photography from this period raises questions for Benjamin that are philosophical questions about experience, particularly about experience in modernity. For example, how do we know the things of this world when we can only experience them through our senses, through

⁸ Harding, “Introduction”.

⁹ This makes more sense in German with the two terms Benjamin uses: *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. In “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”, Benjamin writes, “The greater the shock factor in particular impressions, the more vigilant consciousness has to be in screening stimuli; the more efficiently it does so, the less these impressions enter long experience [*Erfahrung*], and the more they correspond to the concept of isolated experience [*Erlebnis*]” (319). An earlier (1973) translation gives “tending to remain in the sphere of a certain hour of one’s life” which I find clearer. On Benjamin’s theory of experience see also: Hansen, “Cinema and Experience”; Elsaesser, “Between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*”; Wolin, “Benjamin’s Materialist Theory of Experience”.

sensory experiences that we only know through concepts? How has this process of perceiving, and sensing, and making sense changed in modernity, and in particular in the century between 1839, and 1931, when Benjamin was writing?

Benjamin's ideas about photography are associated with his Marxist politics — he is attempting to understand and describe the relationship between the specific historical conditions of capitalist society in this period, and a transformation in experience, which affected the ways in which people were able to understand, and perhaps act to change, their own situation. But the way he writes about photography is also related to his understanding of early German Romantic writings, which date from before Marx. Benjamin wrote his doctoral dissertation, which he finished in 1920, on Early German Romanticism.¹⁰ These writings shaped his understanding of criticism, and of art, and his unique version of historical materialism.¹¹ So here I will be going back not only to the beginnings of photography but, further, to the moment of Early German Romanticism at the very beginning of the nineteenth century.

Benjamin published his “Little History of Photography” in 1931 (this on your right is the original text) only a few months after the Viennese art historian and curator Heinrich Schwarz had published this book (on your left) on David Octavius Hill. Schwarz's book was highly influential, not least on Benjamin.¹² He read Hill and Adamson's paper calotypes in a very particular way, emphasizing their material presence and realism. Schwarz saw these qualities as an effect of Hill's particular artistic sensibility but also the technology — the old, slow Chevalier lenses and paper negatives — and he emphasized their superiority over the nineteenth-century pictorialist photography that was to follow.¹³

Pictorialism was a style of photography that used staging, and retouching to stake a claim for photography as a medium for art. Pictorialism thrived in the late nineteenth century, but had fallen heavily out of fashion in the 1930s. The staged composite photographs of Henry Peach

¹⁰ Benjamin, “The Concept of Criticism”.

¹¹ This is also argued by John McCole who writes that the dissertation “set the coordinates for all his subsequent work”. McCole, *Walter Benjamin*, 82.

¹² Benjamin and Schwarz's taste for Hill and Adamson's photographs is part of a wider German appreciation of their work, that had been growing since an 1899 exhibition of their prints at the Hamburg Art Gallery. Schwarz was key in shaping and cementing this: by the late 1920s only around 20-30 prints had actually been exhibited in Germany and Austria, but Schwarz had acquired 200 on trips to Edinburgh. di Folco, “Hill and Adamson in Germany”.

¹³ Schwarz, *David Octavius Hill: Master of Photography*, 1932.

Robinson are a key example. *Fading Away* (1858) shown here, is among the most famous — it's a montage made up of several individual studies. Both Schwarz and Benjamin saw pictorialism as very distasteful, as a mistaken approach that undermined photographic realism through the overuse of retouching and manipulation and staging. Schwarz argued that when photography attempts to detach itself from reality and aspire to the “limitless world” of painting and the graphic arts it becomes, in his words, “untrue to itself”, and less, rather than more, of an art.

Ironically, though, the reproductions in Schwarz's book are actually retouched — as you can probably see here in the sharp lines of the head against the background, and in the over-delineated features. In fact the photo historian Larry Schaaf has shown that Hill and Adamson regularly retouched their negatives with pencil and pigment, sharpening lines, covering up blemishes, or shading in dark areas.¹⁴ A second irony is that a number of the Hill and Adamson photographs were, in the first place, studies for a painting commemorating the founding of the Scottish Free Church in 1843, and they were posed! This is easier to see in the group photos such as this one. The people in the images were the actual participants in the historical event, so Hill was asking them to pose as themselves, to re-enact their own actions.¹⁵

Throughout this talk I am using, as Benjamin might have, the illustrations of Hill and Adamson's in Schwarz's book. How reproduction changes the images is evident from these details of two photographs taken of Hill by Adamson at the same time. The left one is a scan from a salt print on the National Galleries of Scotland website and the second is re-photographed by me from Schwarz. What I am interested in here though, is what these 1930s writers did with these photographs, what they saw in them, rather than the actual properties of the photographs themselves. I think, I would go so far as to say that we can't find what Benjamin found by studying these photographs, since his argument is not really about the actual visual or material difference between them and others, although it seems to be.

¹⁴ Schaaf, “Science Art and Talent”, 17.

¹⁵ “Hill was, most extraordinarily, able to use real people as active dramatic models, in their own history and while they were still making that history”. Stevenson, “Shadowing Art”, 230.

Benjamin drew heavily on Schwarz's book and the claims that Schwarz made about the artistic merit of these pictures. He even lifted that phrase I am focussing on directly from Schwarz: it is exactly the same in the German version of Schwarz as in Benjamin's German essay: "ringt sich mühsam das Licht aus dem Dunkel". Here, on the top is Esther Leslie's translation of Benjamin: 'light wrests itself agonisingly from the darkness', below, the 1932 English translation of Schwarz: 'light separates itself reluctantly from shadow'.¹⁶

As I said, it is this one phrase that I want to focus on, but to understand it we need to put it in the context of some of the other claims being made by Benjamin and Schwarz, and also their roots in other, older ideas and writings. Note that both translations include a kind of personification of light ("agonisingly", "reluctantly") and that the phrase appears, in both texts, in reference to the long exposure times needed for these photographs, which was apparently thirty seconds in full sunlight, and in the context of a comparison of Hill's photographs to mezzotints.

Mezzotint is a printing process in which a full range of tones (from darks through mid-tones to white) is achieved through the use of a tool that produces tiny pits over the whole surface of the metal plate. There are two methods: dark to light and light to dark. In the dark to light version, which is more common, the whole plate is roughened to render it able to print only black. Then the highlights and midtones are achieved by various degrees of smoothing and burnishing, with the completely smooth areas printing white. In other words, the highlights are rescued out of the darkness, laboriously.

In Schwarz's book, the sentence about light leads into a longer discussion of mezzotint:

"As in mezzotint, the light struggles laboriously out of the darkness: soft halftones emerge from the deepest shadows and convey the transition to luminous brightness of the heads and hands. As in mezzotint, a flowing chiaroscuro surrounds the bodies and harmoniously binds the space and people into one. As in mezzotint, the material appeal of the surface becomes an experience: cravats made of shimmering satin, waistcoats in glossy velvet, collars of thick fur and shawls made of soft Scottish wool."¹⁷

¹⁶ Benjamin, "Small History", 81; Schwarz, *David Octavius Hill*, 39.

¹⁷ Schwarz. This is my translation from the 1931 German edition which reads: "Wie auf Schabkunstblättern ringt sich mühsam das Licht aus dem Dunkel: Weiche Halbtöne tauchen aus tiefsten Schatten empor und vermitteln den Übergang zu leuchtenden Helligkeiten der Köpfe und Hände. Wie auf Schabkunstblättern umspielt ein fließendes Hell-Dunkel die Körper und verbindet harmonisch den Raum und die Menschen zur Einheit. Wie auf Schabkunstblättern wird der stoffliche Reiz der Oberfläche zum Erlebnis: Halsbinden aus

Schwarz was arguing that Hill and Adamson's paper photographs, or calotypes, are less linear and have greater tonal range than other processes such as the daguerreotype and than other calotypes by different photographers (certainly they were technically finer than other calotypes of the time). They look like mezzotints in the way the light seems to have been worked, or worked its own way, out of a dark base, so that only head and hands are fully lit. This technique gives a much greater sense of materiality, emphasising the clothes in particular.

For Benjamin, though, the phrase suggests more than just a comparison with mezzotint. He doesn't actually mention Schwarz in the "Little History", but he does quote the artist-printmaker Emil Orlik, who had published an essay in 1924 called "On Photography". Orlik had claimed that long-exposure was what gave "greatness" or "grandeur" to early photographs in contrast to later photography. A "technical weakness" – the insensitivity of early photography – becomes an aesthetic strength. Orlik wrote that the long exposure time gave a "synthesis of expression" and a stillness to the subjects; Benjamin quotes this and adds that the sitters are not captured "in the moment" as in a snapshot, but seem to grow into it.¹⁸

This term "synthesis of expression" comes from yet another writer, the philosopher Schelling, who in 1804, wrote this:

"The true art of portraiture would consist in embracing the idea of a person that has dispersed into the individual gestures and moments of life, to collect the composite of this idea into one moment and in this way make the portrait . . . more like the person himself, that is, the idea of the person, than he himself is in any one of the individual moments."¹⁹

So, the synthetic portrait would seem to be the opposite of the photograph, which is based around one short moment of exposure. But Orlik and Benjamin seem to suggest that such a

schimmernder Atlasseide, Westen aus mettgänzendem Samt, Kragen aus dichtem Pelz und Schals aus weichem schottischen Tuch."

¹⁸ Orlik, "Über Photographie", in *Kleine Aufsätze* (1924). Benjamin, "Small History", 72. Benjamin writes, as does Schwarz, "Wie auf Schabkunstblättern ringt sich mühsam das Licht aus dem Dunkel". In Esther Leslie's translation, the context is: "As in mezzotints, in a Hill [the light struggles laboriously out of the darkness: Orlik speaks of the "comprehensive illumination" caused by the long period of exposure, which gives 'greatness to these early photographs'." In the translation included in Benjamin's *Selected Writings* the similarity to Schwarz is disguised because of the introduction of a new word into the sentence: "The way light struggles out of darkness in the work of a Hill is *reminiscent* of mezzotint" [my emphasis]. Benjamin, "Little History", 517.

¹⁹ Schelling cited in Brevern, "Resemblance After Photography", 8.

synthesis of expression is possible in the early long exposure photograph. The time of the exposure allows the subject to settle into the pose, in an attitude of waiting enhanced by the fact that they had not sat for a photograph before, and had not yet learnt to present themselves to the camera. They sit still, and they wait.

Orlik tried to explain the effect of the sitter's stillness on the viewer by quoting the famous German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, as well as Schelling. Goethe, Orlik reminded his readers, had described a person sat as if "where it neither rains nor snows and no storm blows".²⁰ This description was actually already a quotation — a phrase from the Roman author Lucretius's influential text *De Rerum Natura* (which translates as *On the Nature of Things*) from the year 50 BCE (this is a 17th century edition).²¹ Lucretius, of course, was not using the phrase to describe how still a sitter must sit for a long exposure photograph. Instead he was describing the realm of the gods: "where it neither rains nor snows and no storm blows".²² His theory was that the universe was not created by the Roman gods, but formed by atoms that had existed for eternity. He did not deny the existence of deities, but he did not believe in an interventionist God. Following the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus, he argued that the gods lived outside in another realm, indifferent to human struggles, in this place "where it neither rains nor snows and no storm blows".

So, Orlik's quotation implies that these early long exposure photographs, present their still and patient sitters like the Epicurean gods, sat outside and above human affairs. To be outside the storm is to be outside of time and history: this is the kind of transcendence that Orlik associates with great art. He suggests that early photographs withstand comparison with painted portraits because of the utter stillness, and sense of remoteness given to them by the technical restrictions.

But in Goethe's time the figure of the storm had an additional and specific meaning: it had become a dominant symbol for the historical rupture produced by the French revolution and

²⁰ Orlik is actually writing about an 1843 photograph by Hermann Blow, "It forces itself to the calm, soothing attitude that Goethe describes in the account of the portrait of Talleyrand' by Gérard." On the influence of Orlik on Benjamin see also Bruggeman, *Walter Benjamin*.

²¹ Goethe wrote: "We could not help being reminded of the Epicurean gods who dwell, "where it neither rains nor snows and no storm blows": this man sits there so peacefully, unmolested by all the storms that rage around him" (Goethe, *Über Kunst und Altertum*). This translation is from Prandi, "Dare to be Happy!", 13-14. Prandi also explains that the phrase is from *De Rerum Natura* book 2. She describes Goethe himself as having increasingly a "Lucretian resignation".

²² Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*.

its chaotic aftermath in the shape of the Terror, the subsequent invasion of German territories by France in the French revolutionary wars, and then the Napoleonic wars.²³ And Goethe was not talking about art in general, but a specific painting by François Gérard. It is a portrait of a figure who had been at the heart of this specific storm, Charles Maurice de Talleyrand Perigord, otherwise known as Talleyrand. Gérard started to paint this portrait in 1807, the year Talleyrand, weary of Napoleon's warmongering, had resigned as Napoleon's foreign minister, reportedly saying "I do not wish to be Europe's executioner".²⁴ So Talleyrand steps outside the storm, and in the painting, Goethe felt, his expression seems to be an almost unbearable impassivity.

So Orlik turns a comment about a particular painting, with a specific historical meaning, into a description of art as something autonomous, something that has its own purposes and sits outside history. The question for Orlik is whether photography can also transcend history in this way. But Benjamin is interested in something else. He is paying attention to photography as a process and as an encounter, and he does this in a way that is informed by his close reading of two early German Romantics: the philosophers Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis. Schlegel and Novalis believed that art is autonomous, but in a sense that is different than for Orlik. It is not that art transcends society and history, but that artworks are active, lively things in their own right, able to generate their own meanings to the receptive and sensitive viewer. In fact, as Benjamin argued in his dissertation, they treated both art and nature in a way that was almost animist, as things that are active and acting on us.²⁵

The Romantics theorised that there is a reality external to consciousness (a world of things-in-themselves) but that we can't directly access these things. Instead, what we can access are the representations that appear to our senses, which are themselves already constructs of the mind. So they see the mind operating at two levels: there is an initial level which is to do with sensation, perception and proprioception; and then there is a higher level which is the level of reflexive self-consciousness through which thinking becomes aware of thinking, and through

²³ On the significance of the storm in Romanticism see Seyhan, "What is Romanticism", 6-8.

²⁴ David Lawday, *Napoleon's Master*, 183.

²⁵ The Early German Romantics took the view that an artwork could be understood through an act of contemplation, as Benjamin puts it "without reference to theory or morality". Benjamin, cited in Steiner, *Walter Benjamin*, 51. On the Early German romantic conception of art's autonomy see also Stoljar, 10-11. In his dissertation, Benjamin cites Schlegel's critique of Sturm und Drang art connoisseurship, in connection to his awareness "of the analogy between aesthetic and epistemological problematics" "The Concept of Criticism", 143. An analogy which Benjamin also draws and which I am drawing here — i.e. between the aesthetic character of an image and the question of how we might know *things*.

which we are able to think of ourselves as “I”, as “me, thinking this, now”. At neither level is there direct access or knowledge of the world, of the reality outside. That does not mean that we can’t know the external world, however. Instead, how we know objects depends on this higher-level thinking, this ability to reflect. “Reflection” isn’t a very helpful word, as it’s actually a visual metaphor relating to mirrors. Reflection gives the illusion of fixedness — we reflect on something already stable and given. But this is not what Schlegel, Novalis and Benjamin mean.

The feminist writer Donna Haraway proposes diffraction as a better metaphor than reflection.²⁶ In science, diffraction or interference patterns are those produced by the overlapping or change in the pattern of waves when they encounter one another — think of raindrops on water — or this photogram by Berenice Abbot made by placing the photographic paper below a shallow tank of water. Feminist physicist Karen Barad says that diffraction, unlike reflection, suggests an encounter with something different from oneself — as she says, it “makes manifest the extraordinary liveliness of the world”.²⁷

Similarly for the Early German Romantics, our reflective thinking is not purely solitary and inward looking; instead, it is a means to encounter other things, which are lively even if, like stones or fossils, they are strictly speaking inanimate. For the Romantics, as Benjamin explained, it is not only humans who reflect, in order to reflect, something does not have to be a self, or to have a mind.²⁸ For Novalis and Schlegel, observation is only possible because of the object’s own self-reflective activity: we can only perceive something at all if it can perceive itself. But reality also looks back at us: famously, Novalis wrote “In all predicates in which we see the fossil, it sees us”.²⁹

For Novalis, Benjamin says, “to observe a thing means only to arouse it to self-recognition”.³⁰ Benjamin calls this “magical observation”. Observation is a process of mutual

²⁶ Haraway, “The Promises of Monsters”.

²⁷ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 28.

²⁸ In “The Concept of Criticism”, Benjamin summarises, “Everything that is in the absolute, everything real, thinks; because this thinking is that of reflection, it can think only itself, or more precisely, only its own thinking” (144) and further “All knowledge is self-knowledge of a thinking being, which does not need to be an “I”” (145).

²⁹ Benjamin, “The Concept of Criticism”, 145; Novalis *Philosophical Writings*.

³⁰ Benjamin, “The Concept of Criticism”, 148.

activity, as Novalis put it: “the stars penetrate the telescope”.³¹ In other words, the thing being seen actively constitutes itself in the eye of the beholder.

Novalis and Schlegel were Romantic poets as well as philosophers, with a strong mystical impulse. As Benjamin points out, mysticism encompasses two contradictory tendencies: on the one hand what Novalis called a “longing for the infinite” a drive towards absolute comprehension, and on the other, a tolerance for the unknown and unknowable and what cannot be communicated. Schlegel and (especially) Novalis emphasised the impossibility of total knowledge and the infinite nature of reflection, which has no end, since there is no possibility of arriving at a conclusion, at an absolute knowledge.³²

It is perfectly credible to argue that the Early German Romantics were indulging in a mad form of mysticism and equally credible to argue that they actually anticipated aspects of quantum physics. For them, as for the quantum physicist, observation is not a neutral, detached and disinterested practice where the object is unaffected by its being observed, or, as Karen Barad says “space, time and matter” do not come before the moment of observation: things come into being in the experiment.³³ Writing in around 1800, they challenged a view that even now many photographers cling to, which is that observing something leaves that thing untouched and unchanged. They also challenged another persistent blindspot in Western thought, which is the tendency to think of matter as mute, dead and inactive, as raw material for our exploitation.

Neither Novalis nor Schlegel ever saw a photograph— poor Novalis died a couple of months before his 29th birthday in 1801. Schlegel, though born in the same year, outlived him by nearly 30 years, but even he did not live to see the invention of photography announced in

³¹ Novalis. *Philosophical Writings*. Benjamin points out that the notion of perception as “an interpenetration of subject and object” appears in Democritus before Novalis: “The Concept of Criticism”, 147.

³² The Romantic commitment to not-knowing which had been described more recently by Manfred Frank as skepticism toward the metaphysical idea of the absolute (Frank 56), is characterised (though not condemned) by Benjamin as mysticism. Frank, Manfred. *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*, New York: SUNY Press, 2012. The phrase “longing for the infinite” (Sehnsucht nach dem Unendlichen) is discussed by Frank, 29. Frank argues that Schlegel and Novalis broke with Kant in that they did not subscribe to the idea of a ground or foundation in philosophy, an absolute, something “unconditioned” or prior to the activity of thinking. By contrast, as Benjamin sees it, in their writing the absolute becomes the medium of thought. Either way, without foundation in something external to itself, thought (or the process of philosophizing) is infinite. There is no higher principle that can be appealed to (Frank 33). Unhooked from this higher principle, reflexive self-consciousness, in which we posit ourselves as an “I” becomes an infinite process that produces the “I”. To put it another way, the self does not pre-exist the act of thinking itself.

³³ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

1839. Yet, the example of the telescope suggests we could think of magical observation in and through another optical apparatus, the photographic camera.

Let's go back again to Benjamin's commentary on these early photographs. Imagine the sitter growing into the photograph, imagine the slow, painful, agonising, reluctant, separation of light and shadow that produces the image in these early photographs with their slow exposure times. Forget what you know about the speed of light and instead picture the light wrestling itself from the darkness, struggling to reach the sensitive surface, across a gulf that is more than just the gap between sitter and camera. Picture it being met by paper soaked in chemicals that slowly registers its presence, that pulls the light into itself and allows itself to be transformed. What we have here is a technical equivalent for the Romantic process of magical observation, in which two reflecting beings (an object and a photographic apparatus) radiate into one another. In the process, Benjamin suggests, they make possible the experience of what he terms aura.

Benjamin's concept of aura is notoriously difficult and has been written about extensively so I don't want to dwell too much on it here, except to show how this is linked to the Romantic concept of magical observation.³⁴ Famously, Benjamin defined aura as "A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close the object may be."³⁵ The object radiates itself towards us, but the moment we grasp it is also the moment we recognise the gulf between us and it, between "I" and "Not-I". It only become thinkable, perceivable, because it has become like us, but at the same time it withdraws, back to its alien otherness. Think of the stars again, thousand or millions of light years away and yet here, now, *in* the telescope. It is this simultaneous absence and presence, this oscillation across space and time, which constitutes the aura.

Generally, for Benjamin, photographs don't have aura, the pictures by Hill and Adamson are a rare exception. This is difficult to understand especially as it is so easy to confuse aura with atmosphere, value, uniqueness. Lets take an example:

³⁴ For a useful discussion of aura, see Hansen, "Benjamin's Aura".

³⁵ Esther Leslie's translation in Benjamin, "Small History" is slightly different — this is the version from the *Selected Writings*, "Little History", 518.

Here is a picture of Lilian, great aunt of my husband, not long before her 17th birthday. A smile seems to play around her lips, she looks cheeky and fun. In a few months she will accidentally kneel on a needle and die from blood poisoning. As Benjamin writes about a different image, knowing her story we seek what he calls “the tiny spark of contingency”, a clue to that terrible future, the anticipation of an event long ago but that also, hasn’t happened yet.³⁶

Lilian’s photograph does not have aura in Benjamin’s terms. Yet surely she is absent-present, here now and so real to us and yet out of reach, lost to the poison that ran through her veins only a decade or so before Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin. Why, according to Benjamin, do only the very earliest photographs admit aura, which is banished from the medium by the 1870s?

Lilian’s photograph is just a fragment of paper on card, now reproduced as a digital image and projected, one of millions of very similar images of different individuals that were being churned out by the studio photography industry in the early twentieth century. Although she seems singular when I tell you her story, Lilian has also become a familiar “type”, a familiar photographic subject. Her picture is neither sufficiently singular nor sufficiently permanent. For Benjamin, it is this materiality, this solidity and sense of permanence that separates the subjects of Hill and Adamson’s photographs from the period of commodity capitalism to which Lilian’s portrait belonged.³⁷ Capitalist modernity annihilates aura along with all that is solid, all those qualities of permanence and singularity that seemed to tie certain social classes and groups of people to a longer history, to a tradition that stretched back generations.

For Benjamin, what is special about Hill and Adamson’s images is not just their technology, or their artistry, but the very particular historical moment in which their subjects were located. They have not yet fully entered modernity or commodity capitalism, the photograph is not yet a means to seek and affirm social status, and they are not yet reducible to ‘types’: they step before the camera unmarked, unlabelled.³⁸ They are as solid and material as their

³⁶ Benjamin, “Little History”, 510.

³⁷ In aura, singularity and permanence are, Benjamin says, “tightly bound”. Benjamin, “Small History”, 84.

³⁸ ‘Unbescholten oder besser gesagt unbeschriftet’: translated as “with their innocence intact – or rather, without inscription” in “Little History”, 512, and in “Small History” as “spotless” and “blank”. I prefer “unmarked” and “unlabelled” because they anticipate what was to come— the typology of the photographic subject with the rise of the carte-de-visite and the cabinet card.

clothes — in Schwarz’s words again: “cravats made of shimmering satin, waistcoats in glossy velvet, collars of thick fur and shawls made of soft Scottish cloth”.³⁹

Benjamin isn’t just talking about the Hill and Adamson photographs. He also writes about this anonymous photograph of the Romantic philosopher Friedrich Schelling, also from the 1840s: Consider Schelling’s dress coat [*he says*] we can be confident that it will pass into immortality along with him; the forms which it adopts on its wearer are not unworthy of the creases on his face”.⁴⁰ While Schwarz had emphasized the plushness of the fabrics, Benjamin emphasizes the way clothing moulds itself to the body. According to the writer Peter Stallybrass, nineteenth-century clothes-makers and repairers referred to the wrinkles in the sleeves of a jacket or coat as “memories”.⁴¹ From the perspective of exchange value every “memory” devalues the commodity, since they are markers of the passage of time, and traces of human use. In Schelling’s photograph, Benjamin draws our attention to the aspect of the coat that detracts from its commodity status and which links it to the past and to duration, the very aspects of clothing that would disappear from later studio photographs, as people presented themselves in their Sunday best or even clothes or costumes hired or borrowed from the photographer.

A year after he wrote “A Little History of Photography”, Benjamin gave a speech where he talked about the French author Marcel Proust’s concept of involuntary memory, which describes that feeling when we find ourselves suddenly flung back into a past moment through the most random things, the taste of a madeline cake soaked in chamomile tea, the sunlight on a wall, the smell of a peach.⁴² Benjamin explained the concept in photographic terms: involuntary memories, he says are visual scenes that, “we have never seen before we remember them” and that are, he says, “developed in the darkroom of the lived moment”.⁴³ Involuntary memories appear like the image on the paper print in the tray of developer.

Benjamin suggested that these Proustian involuntary memories give a sense of connection with a past that is convincing and materially rich, but unreliable, and it is in such experiences that fragments of aura persist into modernity. Involuntary memory is, he suggests, a modern

³⁹ Schwarz, *David Octavius Hill*; Benjamin, “Small History”, 70.

⁴⁰ Benjamin, “Small History”, 72.

⁴¹ Stallybrass, “Marx’s Coat”, 196.

⁴² Benjamin, “A Short Speech on Proust” cited in Hansen, “Cinema and Experience”, p.179.

⁴³ Benjamin, “A Short Speech on Proust” cited in Hansen, “Cinema and Experience”, p.179.

product, the result of a loss of tradition and of urban and technological experiences that we cannot assimilate, that make us slightly battered and traumatised, on edge and in shock.⁴⁴

If early photography provides a kind of material or concrete version of Romantic magical observation, later photography provides something else: through fast flash and exposure times, its instantaneity is a new kind of magic. (This photograph by Harold Edgerton was taken in 1935, only four years after Benjamin wrote “A Little History of Photography”). Once the photo becomes mass-reproducible with the invention of the half-tone print and the wire photograph, photography also sets images travelling, incessantly multiplying, and even pigeons were employed, carrying both photographs and cameras aloft in the first experiments with animal-drones and microfilm.

The invention of instantaneous photography in the 1860s sharpened the sense of photography’s magical qualities but also gave a misleading sense of its being a one way capture, a snapping of reality, a clipping of time. The time it takes to record an image, the exposure time of the photograph, was shortened to the time of a “twinkling of an eye”. There were disputes over how long a period of time constituted an instant, or a twinkle, and it was generally agreed that it was about a tenth of a second.⁴⁵

The speeding up of photography is part of the larger experience of space-time compression in the nineteenth century. The Victorians called it the “annihilation of time and space” and it is an effect of new technological inventions that make distances seem shorter or non-existent because they take so little time to cross — a key example is the telegraph. It is driven by capitalist imperial economics, by the drive to increase profit through faster and more efficient international circulation of money and goods. In the case of photography, the collapse of time and space depended on various technical advances in optics, in photochemistry and mechanics, all stimulated by the new social and economic demands of a growing photography industry.

Over the last century and a half, the term “instant photography” has gained several meanings. It can refer to fast exposure, and to automation: processes feel more “instant” not just because they take little time but also because they take little work. Kodak’s brand of instant

⁴⁴ This argument is developed, for example, in Benjamin, “On Some Motifs”.

⁴⁵ Skaife *Instantaneous Photography*, 9. See also Henning, *Photography: The Unfettered Image*, 44-7.

photography was premised not just on fast exposure but on automation and black-boxing. A black-box technology is one in which the inner workings are concealed and where the passage from input (taking the photographs) to output (receiving the prints) is experienced as relatively automatic, predictable and fast.⁴⁶ The Kodak Brownie, introduced in 1900, was clearly box-shaped, and originally, always black. But, black-boxed instantaneity was perfected, not by Kodak, but by Polaroid. Polaroid cameras, introduced from the 1940s onwards, produced prints directly and automatically from the camera itself.⁴⁷

Both Kodak and Polaroid's brands of instantaneity are brought together in the 1976 film *The Man Who Fell To Earth* (dir. Nic Roeg). The alien Newton, played by David Bowie (*this is the teenage passion bit*), sets up a company called World Enterprises. One of the things the company produces is a camera. Designed to resemble a Box Brownie but in silver aluminium rather than matt black, the camera takes 35mm film rather than the medium format film used in a Brownie. It also develops the film, much like a Polaroid, so that the pictures can instantly be viewed as print. Via such products, Newton is trying to raise the capital he hopes will save his own planet, but also the TV ads for his photographic products allow him to communicate with his far-away family. Note that Newton does not reinvent the newer technology of television (to which he becomes addicted) but that other box, the photographic camera. In the film, it is this photographic invention that fascinates the chemistry professor Nathan Bryce, because he cannot understand how the camera works, and causes him to start investigating Newton, eventually betraying him to the American government, so that the alien never makes it home.

What looks like magic, from one perspective, looks like alien technology from another. New forms of photography, networked digital photographs are more automated, faster and more black-boxed than ever before. They are also instantly transmissible. In other words, they are instant in all the senses I have outlined here; they appear like a sudden thought, a flash of inspiration, abrupt, interruptive and impermanent, an everyday part of our lives and yet, for most of us, technically more incomprehensible than ever. Increasingly, such images appear to be embedding themselves in our lives, becoming our means of conversation and interaction or gesture: think of Instagram and Snapchat, but also of the way in which your mobile phone presses you to use emoji, those little visual symbols that act as shorthand for emotions.

⁴⁶ Tresch *The Romantic Machine*, 116

⁴⁷ On Polaroid's relationship to instantaneity see Buse, *The Camera does the Rest*, 9-10.

If instant photography collapses time and space, the use of digital images (whether photographs or emoji) as a means of instant communication arguably risks becoming solipsistic, by which I mean, rather than facilitating the encounter with something alien or other, or expanding our imaginations, they risk leading to a circular repetition of sameness, a limited repertoire of the always already familiar.⁴⁸ How, in this context, do we pay attention to this optical, technical interaction with something that comes into being in the moment of the interaction? And also, how do we conceive of a space for thought in the context of instant media?

In Benjamin's writing, Hill and Adamson's photographs seem to invoke the Romantic concept of magical observation, in the way Benjamin describes the mutual meeting or coming together of sitter and technology. Schwarz's description of light struggling out of the darkness to which it still clings, was not intended to be about freedom, but reading it through Schlegel and Novalis, Benjamin makes it possible to think of it that way. For these Romantics, the principal property of reflective thinking is its infinite nature. In thinking, we experience ourselves extending, reaching beyond the possible or the knowable. In thinking we experience a kind of freedom but its not at all comfortable or painless.

Normally, when we talk about freedom we mean freedom from constraint. For example: freedom from oppression, from slavery, or from imprisonment. Academic freedom is often defined in terms of the freedom to speak out, to air one's professional judgments, to share the results of one's research, without fear of punishment; artistic freedom as the freedom to express oneself, to transgress the norms of society.⁴⁹

Remember Talleyrand? There is an argument that says that art and academia entail a kind of freedom but it is a freedom bought at a cost: the extent to which these things are free is the

⁴⁸ This is my own observation, but researchers writing on emoji have made similar arguments. See Stark and Crawford, "The Conservatism of Emoji", 4. They argue that 'digital technology seems capable of vast potential but is instead used to produce a dispiriting kind of sameness, something Laura Marks terms "lame infinity" in her book *Enfoldment and Infinity*.

⁴⁹ In philosophy, freedom has two meanings, freedom from necessity (and cause) and freedom from constraint. It is the second meaning that is able to persist in the Anglo-American tradition and informs the concept of liberality. Peter Fenves points out that in this tradition "The word "freedom" remains meaningful as long as it is opposed to "constraint," and so the retreat of philosophical freedom leaves its trace in a certain unconstrainedness, a certain liberality, the principal characteristic of which is an ability to make everything possible." Fenves, "Foreword" xviii.

exact extent to which they are ineffective, they sit, like the Epicurean Gods, or like Talleyrand, outside the storm, commenting on society but completely unable to alter its course. Later Benjamin would argue that photography brought the stars – or the gods —down to earth.⁵⁰ But in “Little History of Photography”, he is suggesting something else, linking early photographs to the Romantic concept of the infinite freedom of thought – and this kind of freedom is not detached but entangled with a lively reality.

Usually it is argued that what is distinctive about the photograph, what sets it apart from every previous kind of picture, is its appearance as a direct, unmediated piece of the real. This is the thing that so many photography theorists have commented on. Benjamin writes about this particular Hill and Adamson photograph of a Newhaven fishwife that there is (in Esther Leslie’s translation): “something that cannot be silenced, obstreperously demanding the name of she who has lived, who remains real here”.⁵¹ This is why the narrative of photography fixing, securing, freezing, capturing is so compelling. Photographic images seem in some ways to be the least free kind of images, always grounded in some kind of reality, always produced by a cause, by what has been, here, there, in front of the camera.

Benjamin’s reading of Hill and Adamson’s pictures suggests how photography loosens the image, ungrounds it, extends its space for play and gives it a thought-like quality. In this sense, photography sets images free. Light struggles out of the darkness, slowly, reluctantly, agonisingly, laboriously. Like the stars that penetrate the telescope, the distance it crosses can be measured in years. It registers itself on the paper, but in order to do so it crosses a breach and there is always that which never makes it, the underexposed or unexposed, that which is not caught and falls between the gaps. And by analogy, art and academic study also set something loose, making it possible for anyone to experience that sense of their extension, of reaching beyond what they know or are comfortable with. Like light struggling out of the darkness, thought finds itself free, not out of some moral imperative or for the sheer fun of it, but because it is faced with a ravine across which all it can do is leap.⁵² The leap is not into thin air but into the arms of something other than ourselves, something alien, something new.

⁵⁰ I am referring to Benjamin, “The Work of Art”, where he argues that photography’s reproductive capacity contributes to the destruction of aura.

⁵¹ Benjamin, “Small History”, 66.

⁵² This is a reference to Nancy, *The Experience of Freedom*: ““It is freedom that definitively “leaps,” or rather it is freedom that is the “leap,” ... The leap is therefore not a free decision of thinking... It is supported by nothing, and it is not thrown into the Kantian dove’s empty space—it leaps into and over nothing. It is but the leap of a start, a burst of existence, an unleashing that unleashes nothing more than the trembling of the existent

at the border of its existence. Thinking trembles with freedom: fear and impatience, luck, the experience that there is no thinking that would not always be given in freedom and to freedom.” (58-9). Nancy is discussing Heidegger, but also the “Kantian dove” is a reference to Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* where he writes “The light dove, cleaving the air in her free flight, and feeling its resistance, might imagine that its flight would be still easier in empty space.” (B9). The dove here is a metaphor for ungrounded philosophizing, the kind of speculation unrooted in experience that had become associated with metaphysics, and from which Kant wanted to dissociate metaphysics in order to establish it as a valid form of enquiry.

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