

The childhood photographs of Benjamin and Kafka: from sacrifice to gesture in the World Theatre

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Abstract

This paper explores Walter Benjamin's remarks on two childhood photographs, one of himself and one of Kafka. The different meanings and implications of these remarks show us the multiplicity of experiences photography makes possible. In this way, we rediscover central aspects of Benjamin's thought, such as mimesis, redemption and oblivion, and enrich our comprehension of what photography is and might be.

I

The purpose of this paper is to assess the significance of four specific text segments, scattered in different texts of Walter Benjamin, which encompass two childhood photographic portraits, one of himself and one of Kafka. The analysis of these segments is also an opportunity to reassess the texts to which they belong, bearing in mind their connection with some of the central aspects of Benjamin's thought and with some of his ideas on photography. It is also an opportunity to expand Benjamin's thought while taking detours, in order to bring forth the multiplicity of experiences enabled by photography and the artistic, expressive and redemptive possibilities concealed within photographic practice.

The first references to the two photographic portraits appear in *Little History of Photography* (1931). They are part of the analysis of the transformations that photography set in motion in the practice of portraiture. According to Benjamin, the social function of painting was disturbed by photography, namely portraiture and especially miniature portraits. This disturbance corresponds to the fundamental moment of the cultural and social absorption of photography: miniature portraits, until then in

the hands of painters, increasingly move into the hands of photographers. Then, after a period of great photographers, such as Nadar, Stelzner, Pierson or Bayard (most of whom had an artistic background and, more importantly, experience as craftsmen), a time came in which businessmen invaded professional photography. The portrayed, particularly the uprising bourgeoisie, saw in photography an easier way to imprint, establish and emphasise their *status quo*¹.

«This was the time photograph albums came into vogue»². While describing these transformations, Benjamin explicitly refers to one of his own family albums as if it was right before his eyes:

Uncle Alex and Aunt Riekchen, little Trudy when she was still a baby, Papa in his first term at university... and finally, to make our shame complete, we ourselves – as a parlor Tyrolean, yodelling, waving our hat before a painted snowscape, or as a smartly turned-out sailor, standing rakishly with our weight on one leg, as is proper, leaning against a polished door jamb.³

This was also the time when photographic studios flourished. In these studios, a large amount of ornaments and décors, with pseudo-artistic or pseudo-exotic intentions, seemed to absorb the portrayed. After a series of anecdotic considerations about these studios and their artificial settings, *Little History of Photography* guides us to a photographic child portrait of Kafka. This shadow-figure was also portrayed in a setting that matches those found in the studios Benjamin describes and ridicules, studios which occupy an ambiguous place between «execution and representation, between torture chamber and throne room»⁴. Nevertheless, the feeling that Kafka's gaze seems to reflect is not shame, as in the case of Benjamin's portrait, but sadness. What stands out above

¹ W. Benjamin, "Little History of Photography" (1931), in *Selected Writings. Vol. 2: 1927-1934*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge/Massachusetts/London 1996, pp. 514-515.

² *Ibid.*, p. 515.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

everything else is the terrifying testimony of a little boy that almost disappears in the setting. What saves him, according to Benjamin, are his eyes: «He would surely be lost in this setting were it not for his immensely sad eyes, which dominate this landscape predestined for them»⁵. There is a certain irony in this photograph and in its description: Kafka's anchor-eyes are the force that prevents him from being engulfed by the things that surround him, that prevents him from disappearing. The sadness of his gaze is the price for salvation.

Similar descriptions of Kafka's photograph can be found in at least four different texts of the Benjaminian *corpus*. The first one, as we have just seen, can be found in *Little History of Photography*; the second and third ones in *The Lamp* and *Mummerehlen*, two short pieces sketched during the final stages of the writing of *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (c. 1933); and finally the fourth in *Franz Kafka. On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death* (1934).

Before exploring the second and third occurrences, it is important to contextualize *The Lamp* and *Mummerehlen*. Both texts are intersected by two lines of work Benjamin was developing in the beginning of the 1930s. On the one hand, they are part of the groundwork for *Berlin Childhood around 1900*⁶; on the other hand, they are closely tied to the philosophical and anthropological themes – such as childhood, remembrance and language – developed in *Doctrine of the Similar* and *On the Mimetic Power*, which are considered to form the mimetic theory of Benjamin. In a certain sense, these two lines of work are interwoven. In fact, some of the segments of *The Lamp* and *Mummerehlen* can also be found, unchanged or with small changes, in the texts and fragments where Benjamin develops his mimetic theory. Furthermore, *The Lamp* ex-

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *The Lamp* is a fragment, not a finished text, and therefore it wasn't included in any of the different versions of the work drafted by Benjamin, although it can be considered a sketch for some of its texts.

plores some of the motifs of *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, such as: remembrance of childhood; an object – in this case a lamp – which opens the intimacy of the past and the paths of remembrance; the articulation of the aforementioned experiences with the history of the nineteenth century; the description of mimetic experiences.

The last part of *The Lamp* narrates the day Benjamin was taken to the photographer in order to have his portrait done. According to Benjamin, this experience reactivated the ancient compulsion to become similar and to behave mimetically, a trace of mimetic violence. Nevertheless, this compulsion plays an important role in the way we exercise our gift to perceive similarities: «The gift we possess for seeing similarity is nothing but a feeble vestige of the formerly powerful compulsion to become similar and to behave mimetically»⁷. Obligated by his parents to become similar to himself, he feels the photographic portrait is torture: «We had to display ourselves, even though nothing lay further from our wishes. Thus, we made ourselves more like the embroidered cushion that someone had pushed toward us, or the ball we had been given to hold, than like a moment from our real lives»⁸. Obligated to resemble himself, young Benjamin blended in with the objects in the studio, in a mimetic exercise of immersion.⁹

Besides these considerations about mimesis, Benjamin also mentions two different photographs which involve two different gazes. The first gaze belongs to his own photograph, where he is shown in front of a screen depicting an Alpine scene. The little alpinist gazes with a forced smile, a gaze that has no repercussion, no consequence in the present. The second one belongs to a photograph of Kafka, the one that was already described in *Little History of Photography*. But what is interesting

⁷ W. Benjamin, “The Lamp”, in *Selected Writings. Vol. 2: 1927-1934*, cit., p. 693.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Several texts from *Berlin Childhood around 1900* can be interpreted as an exploration and a presentation, in the form of “thought-images” (*Denkbilder*), of the different dimensions of mimetic power and its relation to remembrance.

here is that Benjamin enigmatically writes as though Kafka's gaze would concern and affect him more than his own photograph as a child. Then, he takes the place of Kafka and speaks in the first person:

The forced smile with which the little alpinist gazes out at us no longer concerns us. Unlike the other gaze – the one that falls on us from the earnest face in the shadow of the potted palm. *I stand there bareheaded; in my hand, a large straw hat that I am holding nonchalantly, with carefully rehearsed gracefulness.* My elbow leans anxiously on the edge of the little mahogany table. Behind me, but at a great distance, next to the heavy curtain covering the door, stands my mother, her narrow waist in a tight-fitting dress that matches my jacket, which is embroidered with naval emblems.¹⁰

We know that Benjamin takes the place of Kafka because this photograph corresponds to the one described in *Little History of Photography*. But now, instead of a comparison between the two photographs regarding the spaces and décors, instead of a reflection on the social and cultural transformations brought by portrait photography, instead of emphasizing the sacrificial element of photography, Benjamin becomes Kafka, therefore creating a mimetic movement which explores an ambiguity, a space for playing, a passage, nurtured by Kafka's gaze and its affective power¹¹. This experience shows us that photographs can never be reduced to the mere sacrifice or mortification of the portrayed; they are also a reservoir of experiences.

This scene is repeated in the text *Mummerehlen*. "Muhme" is an old German word for "aunt", while "Rehlen" is the name of a person. Because Benjamin didn't know the word "Muhme" when he was a child, he transformed "Muhme Rehlen" into a spirit called "Mummerehlen"¹². *Berlin*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*. The italics are ours, in order to highlight the moment Benjamin becomes Kafka.

¹¹ On this movement between Benjamin and Kafka, see also E. Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 1997, pp. 106-115 and M.F. Molder, "Notas sobre a Treva Visível", in *Lisboa Photo 2003 – Passagens*, Edições Asa 2003, pp. 24-61.

¹² W. Benjamin, "Die Mummerehlen", in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by R. Tiedemann, H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1972-1991, vol. 4, pp. 260-263. There are two versions of *Mummerehlen*, but only the first, published in 1972, contains

Childhood around 1900 explores these misunderstandings on various occasions. They are not only a distortion of the world, but also a way to explore the core of language and to reconstruct the singular world of childhood. In this text, Benjamin also describes his experience at the photographer and its different elements: the difficulty of resembling himself (and consequently the idea that it was easier for young Benjamin to feel disfigured, deformed by the resemblance with every object in the studio); the photographic studio as a place of sacrifice; and the reference to Kafka's photograph as if Benjamin was Kafka himself, remembering the moment when the photo was taken.

Like the distortion and the reinvention of language which guide the child into the core of language and of the world, i.e. a movement that seems to exist without a fixed centre or identity, so does this game of becoming someone or something else, nurture the development of a phantasmagorical element. Photographs, and especially those that face us with a disturbing gaze, are intrinsically bound with death. In order to characterize this mimetic element, Eduardo Cadava employs an expression used by Benjamin in the context of his analysis of Baudelaire's poetry: «a kind of mimesis of death»¹³. Photography, as Roland Barthes also showed in a decisive manner, enables the depiction of the self as other, a fracture which inevitably is related to death¹⁴. However, Barthes' and Benjamin's point of view do not coincide entirely. According to Barthes, the «self as other» is closer to a process of dissociation of the

the scene of the photographer. In the version found by Giorgio Agamben in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in 1981, both the scene of the photographer and the Chinese folktale are missing. This means that we are using the first version of this text. The *Selected Writings* in English only include the so-called "final version". As Gerhard Richter points out, it is curious that in a text where the phantasmagorical element plays an important role, the scene of the photographer is omitted in the 1981 version, transforming the scene in a haunted fragment. G. Richter, *Walter Benjamin and the Corpus of Autobiography*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit 2000, p. 277.

¹³ E. Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History*, cit., p. 115.

¹⁴ R. Barthes, *La Chambre Claire. Note sur la Photographie*, Cahiers du Cinéma, Gallimard/Seuil, Paris 1980, pp. 24-33.

conscience of identity, while the experiences described by Benjamin allow us to think the photographic portrait in its relation with mimetic movements and experiences of affinity. Nevertheless, Barthes also speaks of his experience with portraits as «a micro-experience of death»¹⁵ in which he becomes a spectre.

Photography recurrently and persistently questions our identity, showing us the multiplicity that informs our existence, and does it in a caustic manner, saturating the world with gazes, with auras that plunge into our inner core, with ghosts that are difficult to redeem¹⁶. Apparently, these issues seem to belong exclusively to a sort of existential side of photography, strictly connected with our individuality, but in reality they are disseminated in our culture and in our collective experiences, and they are also a source of inspiration for many expressive and artistic uses of photography.

The text *Franz Kafka. On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death* (chronologically, the last one to render a description of Kafka's portrait, a description that emphasises his sadness) develops an interpretation of Kafka's work sustained by the notion of «gestures in the World Theatre». This interpretation is preceded by the aforementioned description of the photograph:

There is a childhood photograph of Kafka, a supremely touching portrayal of his 'poor, brief childhood'. It was probably made in one of those nineteenth-century studios whose draperies and palm trees, tapestries and easels, placed them somewhere between a torture chamber and a throne room. [...] Immensely sad eyes dominate the landscape arranged for them, and the auricle of a large ear seems to be listening for its sounds.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁶ Kracauer characterizes the temporal experience with photography (in a certain sense similar to playing an old hit song or reading letters written long ago) as an unredeemed ghostly reality capable of conjuring a disintegrated unity. S. Kracauer, "Photography", in *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 19, 3, Spring 1993, p. 431.

The ardent 'wish to be an Indian' may have consumed this great sadness at some point.¹⁷

According to Benjamin, this «wish to be an Indian» touches the heart of Kafka's literary achievements, and the revelation of its secret can be found in *Amerika*, because for the first time, a protagonist of his novels has a name: Karl Rossmann. The third and happiest incarnation of K. is reborn in the Natural Theatre of Oklahoma. In this Theatre everyone is welcome, the actors are only asked to act as themselves.

For Benjamin, Kafka's writings reveal the construction of a code of gestures that didn't have any clear symbolic meaning at first, «rather, the author tried to derive such a meaning from them in ever-changing contexts and experimental groupings. The theatre is the logical place for such groupings»¹⁸. Each gesture is an event in itself. Therefore, Kafka's work could be considered an essay on gestures, a search for the lost gestures, a search fed by the ardent wish to be an Indian: a task for an entire life.

Let us now highlight other aspects of Benjamin's interpretation related to strangeness and oblivion. These two aspects imply a conception of the body – of our own body – as the main source of strangeness. «For just as K. lives in the village on Castle Hill, modern man lives in his own body: the body slips away from him, is hostile toward him. It may happen that a man wakes up one day and finds himself transformed into vermin. Strangeness – his own strangeness – has gained control over him»¹⁹. This idea bears a profound relation with animals: in Kafka's work, «animals are the receptacles of the forgotten»²⁰, they somehow have a privileged connection with a prehistoric world. What is forgotten is never purely individual; there is something cosmic (but not necessarily

¹⁷ W. Benjamin, *Franz Kafka. On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death*, in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2: 1927-1934, cit., p. 800.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 801.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 806.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 810.

religious, as Benjamin, against his contemporary theological interpretations of Kafka's work, repeatedly emphasises) in the unfathomable gestures.

Benjamin also refers to the importance of the student in *Amerika*, whose gestures are enigmatic. Unlike Karl Rossmann and the other characters of *Amerika*, the student was unable to find his role in the World. In Kafka's oeuvre he incarnates the arduous activity of study as a search for redemption, a search for the lost gesture. To explain this idea, Benjamin establishes an analogy between Kafka's situation and the strangeness brought by the new techniques of reproducing reality (cinema and the phonograph, in this particular case). Cinema and the phonograph were invented in a time of great alienation, of unpredictable intervening situations:

Experiments have proved that a man does not recognize his own gait on film or his own voice on the phonograph. The situation of the subject in such experiments is Kafka's situation; this is what leads him to study, where he may encounter fragments of his own existence – fragments that are still within the context of the role.²¹

Study is not a promise of justice or happiness; it is a search that might not come to a conclusion. In the case of Kafka, a search for the lost *gestus*, a search for the name that has a connection with the role of his life. The ardent wish to be an Indian is thus a fight against sadness, an endless cavalry charge against oblivion.

II

Let us now reconsider some of the ideas Benjamin develops on Kafka by transposing them to the field of photography. To search for the lost *gestus*, to search for the name in the World Theatre, to reborn as other as a condition to find our intimacy: this can also be the task of photography, of its deathly mimesis. Before cinema and the phonograph, photography

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 814.

was already a powerful source of strangeness in our relationship with others and with ourselves. It interferes with the strangeness of our body, it disturbs our self-knowledge, it imposes a particular form of study and it also obliges us to follow traces and to pay attention.

In order to extend this transposition of the gestures in the World Theatre to the field of photography, we must explore two of Benjamin's ideas. The first one reads as follows:

The entrance of the temporal factor into the panoramas is brought about through the succession of times of day (with well-known lighting tricks). In this way, the panorama transcends painting and anticipates photography. Owing to its technological formation, the photograph, in contrast to the painting, can and must be correlated with a well-defined and continuous segment of time (exposure time). In this chronological specificity, the political significance of the photograph is already contained *in nuce*.²²

This segment of *Das Passagen-Werk* clearly shows how photography, according to Benjamin, is unthinkable without its technological formation. But this also means that the technological formation conceals, in an embryonic form, the possibilities of photography, an idea that we can perhaps trace back (though in a different context) to the inner logic of the concept of origin that Benjamin brings forth in the *Preface of The Origin of German Tragic Drama*²³. To perceive photography in a close relation to its origin and to perceive what the exposure time contains *in nuce* (not only in the political sense, as Benjamin mentions, but also in the aesthetical, philosophical or anthropological sense) is to assert that the photographic apparatus displays a paradoxical movement of restitution and incompleteness of reality. As a burn mark in the photosensitive surface, this reality is an origin. This means that the practice of photography, as a technological instrument, contains in its interior, as a sort of

²² W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, The Belknap Press of University Press, Cambridge / Massachusetts / London 1999, [Y 10, 2], pp. 690-691.

²³ W. Benjamin, *Erkenntniskritische Vorrede*, in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, cit., vol. 1, pp. 207-237.

promise, its own redemptive possibilities, not only regarding the possibility of transforming the photographic sacrifice in a creative or political act, but also regarding the possibility of combating oblivion.

The second idea comes from a section of *On some motifs in Baudelaire* where Benjamin refers to photography in terms of an amplification of our *mémoire involontaire*. This implies a change in human experience: in the same blow, photography takes part in the «decline of the aura» and amplifies our *mémoire involontaire*²⁴. Despite all the losses brought about by photography, it still allows an amplification of our contact with new and unseen gestures, gestures that were buried under our habit, our consciousness or our optical limits. In other words, photography reveals our optical unconscious²⁵. In this text on Baudelaire, Benjamin also refers to photography:

In the mid-nineteenth century, the invention of the match brought forth a number of innovations which have one thing in common: a single abrupt movement of the hands triggers a process of many steps. This development is taking place in many areas. A case in point is the telephone, where the lifting of a receiver has taken the place of the steady movement that used to be required to crank the older models. With regard to countless movements of switching, inserting, pressing, and the like, the “snapping” by the photographer had the greatest consequences. Henceforth a touch of the finger sufficed to fix an event for an unlimited period of time. The camera gave the moment a posthumous shock, as it were. Haptic experiences of this kind were joined by optic ones, such as are supplied by the advertising pages of a newspaper or the traffic of a big city. Moving through this traffic involves the individual in a series of shocks and collisions. At dangerous intersections, nervous impulses flow through him in rapid succession, like the energy from a battery.²⁶

The «snapping» and the moment as a «posthumous shock» (a consequence of the technological formation of the photographic apparatus)

²⁴ W. Benjamin, “On some motifs in Baudelaire”, in *Selected Writings, vol. 4: 1938-1940*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge/ Massachusetts/London 2003, p. 337.

²⁵ On the optical unconscious see, for example, W. Benjamin, “Little History of Photography”, cit., pp. 510-512.

²⁶ W. Benjamin, “On some motifs in Baudelaire”, cit., p. 328.

contain *in nuce* a reservoir of experiences. In this scenery of new gestures conveyed by the new apparatus, gestures that engender haptic and optic experiences, experiences of shock, human beings and their sensorium are subjected to a complex training. For Benjamin, they must predispose themselves to a constant exercise in order to face up to the tasks of the present. This is perhaps a subterranean – but vital – stream that runs through *Little History of Photography* and, in a more direct manner, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*.

Bearing these considerations in mind, let us quote Derrida on photography: «Every culture has its phantoms and the spectrality that is conditioned by its technology»²⁷. Thus, photographs confront us and oblige us to deal with an unredeemed reality (using Kracauer's terms). Present under the form of small spectres in our culture and in our experiences, photography requires specific forms of attention and study. In this Theatre of haunted Worlds it would be possible for someone – as Kafka tried – to encounter:

Fragments of his own existence – fragments that are still within the context of the role. He might catch hold of the lost *gestus* the way Peter Schlemihl caught hold of the shadow he had sold. He might understand himself, but what an enormous effort would be required! It is a tempest that blows from forgetting, and study is a cavalry attack against it.²⁸

In this sense, photography is a privileged medium to connect the new forms of experience (and the new gestures) with everything that is constantly menaced by the passage of time. Of course, photography is far from being a promise of salvation. Nonetheless, it is more than a simple way to deal with death and to remember our loved ones, it is also a field for play in which we exercise ourselves with outer and inner reality.

²⁷ J. Derrida, *Copy, Archive, Signature: a Conversation on Photography*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2010, p. 39.

²⁸ W. Benjamin, “Franz Kafka. On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death”, cit., p. 814.

III

Summing up the ideas in this paper, we can say that Benjamin's references to his own photograph and Kafka's can be divided in at least three different moments, which also correspond to three forms of experiencing with photography.

Firstly, in *Little History of Photography*, Benjamin compares the two photographs. The photographs are placed side-by-side, showing us the similarity between the settings and the social and cultural context in which they were produced. There is a first reference to the sadness in Kafka's gaze.

Secondly, in *The Lamp* and *Mummerehlen*, he refers to the two photographs within the context of mimesis. Both photographs are interpreted as a result of a certain mimetic violence that parents practice on their children. This violence is simultaneously a sacrifice and a deep experience into the roots of perception of similarities – with all the distortion, detours and movements it presupposes. The impossibility of a stable identity is pushed up to the extreme: not only does young Benjamin find it easier to resemble the things in the studio than to resemble himself, but also, while remembering his childhood and Kafka's photograph (it is not important if this photograph was really in front of his eyes or if he was remembering it), he becomes Kafka, thus creating an ephemeral identity, a haunted image of himself. Perhaps Kafka's sadness was the best way for Benjamin to get to know himself.

In the text *Franz Kafka* the function of Kafka's photograph is quite different. The affective dimension, sadness, gives birth to a search for the lost gestures in the World Theatre; not really a gesture of becoming other in order to fulfil a desire of self-alienation, but instead a creative gesture, the creation of a fictional world.

From our perspective of the photographic experience, the ideas outlined in this paper allow us to state that all these elements – mimesis,

affection, fiction – can be part (individually or combined) of a photographic work. Photography bears a profound relation to issues of affection, strangeness, memory and representation of the body. The tension (or the paradox) between presentation and detour, between restitution and incompleteness, embodied in the distinctive mimetic character of photography, with all the distortion it allows, makes it easier to understand the artistic relevance of photography. From John Coplans to Cindy Sherman, we could say that contemporary photography – especially the one that deals with the human body, portraiture and self-portraiture – cannot avoid to step into the World Theatre, persistently exercising the familiar strangeness of human gestures, persistently pursuing the redemption of reality, and persistently studying and fighting against oblivion.