

Seized Images: Photography, Memory, and the Holocaust

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In early 1940, Walter Benjamin entrusted the manuscript for his essay “Theses on the Philosophy of History” to Hannah Arendt. Arendt and Benjamin were among a group of Jewish ex-Berliners who had been living in Paris, and were trying to make their way to the States to evade Nazi persecution. Benjamin had not yet received his emergency exit visa, but Arendt had, so Benjamin asked her to bring his manuscript to Theodor Adorno, who had recently relocated the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research to New York City (where it later became the New School for Social Research).¹

The exodus from France to the United States involved crossing the Pyrenees into Spain, then passage to Lisbon where ships set sail for New York. Arendt and her group made it to Lisbon, and then to New York; Benjamin did not. When Benjamin arrived at the border crossing into Spain, several days after Arendt, he was denied access, and that night he took his life, choosing to avoid the destiny he knew awaited him if he returned to Paris.

When Hannah Arendt arrived in New York, she presented the manuscript to Adorno, who did not publish it at the time (though he did publish it many years later, when Benjamin’s writings came more into vogue). It is reasonable to

¹Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt, For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 160-163. See also Arendt’s Introduction to *Illuminations* for her account of Benjamin’s attempt to leave Europe and subsequent suicide.

assume that the “Theses,” based on an unorthodox concept of historical materialism, furthered the notion in the minds of the exiled Frankfurt school academics that Benjamin’s loyalty to Marxist thought was rather questionable. Benjamin’s essay is a complex, poetic, and at times elusive piece that is usually read as an argument against both historicism and traditional readings of historical materialism, accomplished by way of Jewish mysticism. Given the context in which he wrote it, making his way, despairingly, out of a Europe which seemed to be (and, indeed, turned out to be) doomed, his arguments against nostalgic revivals of the past, and against the belief that the course of the future necessarily had some inherent logic, are quite understandable from our perspective today.

However, I prefer to read the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” as a statement, almost a manifesto, on the ways in which history is recorded, as the means by which we try to make sense of the events of the past. In its specific relation to the moment in which it was written, I further understand aspects of Benjamin’s essay as a prescient call for certain strategies to be employed in representing the Holocaust. Benjamin writes:

The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. “The truth will not run away from us”: in the historical outlook of historicism these words of Gottfried Keller mark the exact point where historical materialism cuts through historicism. For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably. (The

good tidings which the historian of the past brings with throbbing heart may be lost in a void the moment he opens his mouth.)²

Images of the past only become recognizable, somewhat uncannily so, through their relation to the present moment. Only by understanding that it is through the present that we elucidate the past can we avoid the risk of having the past “disappear irretrievably.” Benjamin’s argument is a more complex iteration of the call, most often stated with regard to the Holocaust, to “never forget,” but with an added imperative for the speaker to disclose his or her present position of subjectivity. It is important to note that Benjamin, writing here of the work of the historian, presents it in the form of pictures and images. How different, indeed, is Benjamin’s manifesto from Adorno’s most famous quote, “To write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric.”³ HOW EXACTLY IS THIS DIFFERENT?

²Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, Ed. and Introduction by Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1968), 255.

³T. W. Adorno, ‘Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft’, article of 1949, published in 1951, republished in *Prismen: Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* (1955, 1963, 1969). English translation *Prisms: Cultural Criticism and Society* by S. & S. Weber, (Neville Spearman, London, 1967; MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1981). It is also interesting to compare Adorno’s quote to another line from Benjamin’s *Theses*: “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.” (*Illuminations*, 256) The difference in the two writers’ quotes belies a very different understanding of the function of art in society.

The manner in which Benjamin writes in the “Theses” of images of the past speaks particularly aptly to the lens-based media of photography, film, and video. His descriptions of the past are of images that “flit by;” of images that flash up at an instant; of “truth[s] that will not run away.” These articulations are all reminiscent of language that has been repeatedly used to describe the photographic image. Benjamin recognizes, however, the problematics involved in the idea of a representation of history (or, for that matter, the representation in an image) as *any* kind of truth: “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ . . . It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.”⁴

An intimate relation exists between images and memory, and Benjamin’s use of terms related to photography is not accidental, for the relation between photographs and memory is even more intimate. Sigrid Weigel, writing of the associations between Benjamin’s approach to history and psychoanalytic conceptions of corporeal and pictorial memory, writes that for Freud “memory is inscribed into the body in the form of permanent traces which structure, in response to certain perceptions, the repetition of affects and mental images associated with them.”⁵ Lacan, in his early work, often spoke of the ways in which images form the unconscious. (He would later revise this thinking, moving away from images towards language.) Memories make their mark on the unconscious; functioning as indexical signs, in that through the marks they make, they become comprehensible. Photographs are also indexical signs:

⁴Benjamin, 255.

⁵Sigrid Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 153.

marks left by light on film and paper. The relationship of photographic images to memory is often framed in terms of the fact that a photograph shows “what once was.” Additionally, it is this relationship between photographs as indices of the visual and memories as indices of events, both marking the unconscious, which makes photographic media particularly well-suited for dealing with history and memory. Further, it is for these reasons that photographic media are particularly well-suited and often employed for works dealing with the Holocaust.

Shimon Attie, Daniel Eisenberg, and Naomi Tereza Salmon are artists whose Holocaust-related works in photography and film speak directly to this relation between photographic images and memory, while formed by their contemporary positions of subjectivity. Exemplary of many current artistic strategies, they recognize that “[h]istory is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the Now.”⁶ By addressing Holocaust memory, these artists contribute to the writing of Holocaust history, for, as Weigel states, the “qualitative difference between memory and historiography is eliminated, and the construction of history is analogous to the structure of recollection.”⁷

Shimon Attie is a San Francisco-based artist who produced “Finistere Medine” in 1991-3, a series of performance/installations and subsequent photographic documentation which has been exhibited widely in the United States and Europe. For this body of work, Attie selected pre-World War II black-and-white photographs of a Berlin neighborhood of Ostjüden, Eastern European

⁶Benjamin, 261.

⁷Weigel, 156.

Jews who settled in Germany, and were often derided by the assimilated urban German-Jewish community for their traditionalism. In the performance/installation segment, he projected these images onto the exterior walls of buildings in the same area of Berlin, projecting them back onto the exact locations where the original images were shot as often as possible.⁸ A series of color photographs serves as the documentation of these site-specific projections.

The “Finestere Medine” series makes a deceptively simple, though eloquent, statement; the images serve as a reminder of what once was. However, when the uncanny experience of viewing the images is examined, a much more complex statement, equally eloquent, surfaces. The archival images seem familiar, and indeed they are—we have seen images like them, if not the very same ones, quite often in museums, documentaries, books, etc. They are the *kind* of images that immediately signify the Holocaust (regardless of the fact that the photos were shot before the war). Here, we see them re-contextualized, that is, placed back into their original context, with which we are not nearly as familiar. By projecting the old photographs back onto their original locations, Attie provides us with the opportunity to viscerally comprehend that our contemporary knowledge of these images is displaced, decontextualized, fragmented. In keeping with Benjamin’s idea of history, we see here a fleeting image of the past (in this case all the more fleeting since it is a projection, and we are keenly aware of its impermanence) informing our current understanding of that past. All the qualities of the old images—their black and white-ness, their

⁸In most cases, the original locations for the archival photographs could not be verified. In some cases, the original locations were verified, but the sites have changed so radically that they were not recognizable. Locations of the original images were matched to the projections wherever possible.

graininess, and their existing only through the light being emitted from some seemingly unidentifiable source—mirror the nature of memory itself. Framed within a contemporary, “full-color” location, we may wish to draw relations between the past and the present. In post-Wall Berlin, have social antagonisms really been resolved? A parallel is formed between this contemporary question and historical ones: Did the divisive relationship between the assimilated Jews of Berlin and the Ostjüden aid Hitler’s destruction of both?

Similarly, Daniel Eisenberg’s short film *Displaced Person* of 1981 re-examines archival imagery. This work combines film footage from 1930s newsreels with archival images documenting Hitler’s arrival in Paris immediately following France’s capitulation to the Third Reich. The footage is slowed down, repeated, cropped, and manipulated in various other ways through the use of an optical printer. We see a variety of images: two boys on a bicycle, Hitler approaching the Eiffel Tower, young girls waving goodbye and running after a departing train, various sites around Paris. The original subtitles from the silent films remain intact, though their original sense is destroyed through the editing. The voice-over, in English with a strong French accent, is spoken fragments from a lecture by Claude Lévi-Strauss. These text fragments play off the bits of subtitles, at times seeming to form complete thoughts while more often creating additional fragmentation. A skeletal structure—just enough to maintain continuity—is provided through the music: a string quartet by Beethoven which at times dictates the visual editing and determines the length of the piece.

The voice-over speaks of memory, loss, translation, and attempts to find meaning and order in the universe. Through these themes, and through decontextualization of the archival imagery, Eisenberg alludes to the attempt made in the present to make sense of the past. Again, the *kinds* of images shown to us signify the Holocaust through their formal qualities. However, with the

exception of the images of Hitler himself, many of the images refuse to be situated, giving us only bits of something that we know is now lost. There is a desire manifested in this re-examination and manipulation of old imagery; the desire to understand. If we look closely enough at the fleeting filmic images, perhaps we can learn something new, make some better sense of the catastrophe, similar to the ways in which we re-examine our own memories, trying to learn from the traces left on our psyches. Ultimately, though, no complete understanding can be reached, and we are left to deal with our own sense of loss.

Naomi Tereza Salmon's work also can be seen as an attempt at ordering the past, though through a different kind of reexamination. Salmon, an Israeli artist, was commissioned to photographically document various objects from World War II for Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem. These images gave rise to her 1996 installation, *Personal Possessions/Corpus Delicti*, currently being exhibited in Germany. Salmon has arranged her photographs in grids, randomly juxtaposing very different kinds of images. Among the objects she photographed are a broken comb, a label from a can of Zyklon (the gas used in concentration camps), a broken pair of eyeglasses, a set of teeth, a snapshot of Hitler. The source of some of the objects is known, but for most it is unknown, eerily noted as "undesignated."

Although the images in Salmon's installation are not archival, they document objects from the Holocaust era, and so offer an attempt, similarly to Attie's and Eisenberg's work, to understand the past through a present re-ordering of images. The amassed individual images remind us of the obsessive way in which the Nazis collected, classified, and documented these "spoils." We commonly see images of these objects in great quantities: piles of combs, teeth, eyeglasses. Salmon's strategy of showing these relics individually works against

more typical Holocaust representations which ask us to make some sense of a number, be it six thousand, six million, or 13 million; numbers that become meaningless in their magnitude. The randomness of Salmon's juxtapositions moves these images far away from the those we've seen before, raising questions about how we try to codify the past—from the specific to the general—as well as confronting Nazi ideology itself. The Nazis thrived on exacting classifications and orderings, evidenced by everything from their treatment of collected objects to their definitions of race. These classifications are thrown into complete disarray when an image of the tool of the perpetrator is placed next to an image of a possession of the victim. We are reminded that these objects are only meaningful to us through the significations their representation has been given in contemporary culture.

Currently, we are seeing a preponderance of artwork being created about the Holocaust. Unfortunately, the vast majority of this work slips easily into expressions of sentimentality, or vague generalizations that rely on an abstract history of victimization. This is quite often the case with work that makes use of archival imagery—I would argue that we have over-viewed many of the images of the Holocaust to the point that they have lost their impact, much like photographs of homeless people or people with AIDS lose their meaning through repetition. Representations of the Holocaust need to be examined, for not only is critique warranted on the ways in which the history of the Holocaust is recorded, but also on its positioning as the quintessential instance of trauma in the twentieth century. The work of Shimon Attie, Daniel Eisenberg, and Naomi Tereza Salmon accomplishes aspects of this critique. The strength of their work lies precisely in their refusal of sentimentality, and their refusal to posit all-encompassing conclusions. Through re-presenting images of the past that are

not the ones we usually see, these artists approach memories through the critical gaze of the present, thus creating potent statements not only about the Holocaust itself, but also about the manner in which the Holocaust is represented today.

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