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Rephotography and the Ruin of the Event
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Abstract:

Rephotography is the practice of retracing the location depicted in an old photograph and taking a new image from the exact same perspective. The two photographs are then combined within the same photographic frame. Originally used in scientific surveys, rephotography is now a widely popular trend, featuring a variety of technologies. In this article I employ the idea of the ruin to conceptualise rephotography's potential to expose the temporality of space and the spatiality of time. First, I relate Walter Benjamin's theory of the ruin to his notion of photography and introduce the notion of the photograph as a ruin of the event that it captures. Subsequently, with reference to Mark Klett's pioneering work I explore how rephotography spatialises this past event and transforms corresponding details of the physical environment into ruins. Finally, I examine rephotography's performative and affective dimensions through two popular blogs, *Dear Photograph* and *Link to the Past,* that feature different techniques of layering images.

Keywords: allegory; nostalgia; photography; rephotography; ruin

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Introduction

Coined by the American geologist and photographer Mark Klett (Klett et al. *After the Ruins* 5), the term "rephotography" has been widely used to describe the practice of retracing the location depicted in an old photograph and taking a new image from the exact same perspective. Since its original use as a geographical research tool in the advance and wide accessibility of digital photography and imaging technologies, rephotography has become an increasingly popular trend. A simple Google search yields thousands of hits on rephotography that reveal the large variety of techniques used by professionals and amateurs alike to practice this genre of photography.

In this article I employ the idea of the ruin to conceptualise rephotography's potential to lay bare the temporality of space and the spatiality of time. Conceiving of photographs in terms of ruins and photography in terms of archaeology looks back on a long tradition. Freud used both archaeology and photography as metaphors to illustrate the operation of unconscious phenomena (Meek 52), while the currency of trauma theory has yielded approximations of the structure of the traumatic experience through both photography (Baer) and the ruin (Trigg). As Michael Shanks and Connie Svabo surmise in a recent article, "The ruin, the archaeological find, the photographic image bears [sic] testimony to the past in the present" (240).

How does rephotography reconfigure this testimonial power of the photograph? In response to this question I mobilise the notion of the photograph as a ruin of the event that it captures. Subsequently, with reference to Mark Klett's pioneering work I explore how rephotography spatialises this past event and transforms corresponding details of the physical environment into ruins. Finally, I examine

rephotography's performative and affective dimensions through two popular blogs, *Dear Photograph* and *Link to the Past,* that feature different techniques of layering images.

The Ruin of the Event

In his *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928), Walter Benjamin uncovers the operation of allegory as a literary device eclipsed by what is traditionally regarded as the more cohesive and aesthetically pleasing application of the symbol. In a celebrated passage, he embraces allegory as a core component of German tragic drama, the *Trauerspiel:*

> The allegorical physiognomy of the nature-history, which is put on stage in the *Trauerspiel,* is present in reality in the form of the ruin. In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay. Allegory thereby declares itself to be beyond beauty. Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things. (177-178)

For Benjamin, allegory is a mode of sensibility that, rather than relishing beauty and harmony, revels in the materiality of language. Withheld from the metaphysical aspirations of the symbol, allegory exposes, rather than disguises, processes of dislocation and displacement. It foregrounds the fragment as an entity severed from the whole, devoid of teleological function. Benjamin recognises in it an image of history merging into the materiality of the setting, that is, in linguistic terms, the reduction of discourse to its material components. [1] In Susan Buck-Morss's reading of Benjamin, the Baroque allegoricists

> heaped emblematic images one on top of another, as if the sheer quantity of meanings could compensate for their arbitrariness and lack of coherence. The result is that nature, far from an organic whole, appears in arbitrary arrangement, as a lifeless, fragmentary, untidy clatter of emblems. The coherence of language is similarly "shattered." Meanings are not only multiple, they are "above all" antithetical. (173)

As opposed to the totalising aspirations of the Romantic symbol, allegory cherishes disruptions, gesturing toward unity only to announce its artificiality.

Clearly, the ruins Benjamin associates with allegory have more in common with rubble than with aesthetically pleasing architectural remains. In his essay "The Ruin" (1911) Georg Simmel locates the aesthetic value of ruins in their potential to reconcile the resilient force of civilisation with the disintegrating force of nature. From the dialectics of these two conflicting forces, Simmel argues, a sense of harmony emerges: "Here psychic wholeness is at work—seizing, in the same way that its object fuses the contrast of present and past into one united form, on the whole span of physical and spiritual vision in the unity of aesthetic enjoyment, which, after all, is always rooted in a deeper than merely aesthetic unity" (24). Without this unity, he maintains, ruins do not lend themselves to be enjoyed aesthetically. In her voluminous study entitled *Pleasure of Ruins* (1953) Rose Macaulay explores a range of artistic representations of ruins and identifies a similar sense of wholeness, ensured by the patina of time that places the ruins at a remove from the present, as a criterion of aesthetic pleasure. New ruins, on the other hand, "are for a time stark and bare, vegetationless and creatureless; blackened and torn, they smell of fire and mortality" (453).

These new ruins that Macaulay describes on the last pages of her book are those of the Second World War, which she remembered just as vividly as Benjamin remembered the destruction of the First World War during his work on *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (Buck-Morss 170). These are ruins of the all too recent past, infused with memories of pain and loss, bespeaking fragmentation, rather than an "upward-leading tendency" that Simmel expects from ruins (23). Benjamin's defence of allegory evinces a sensibility that privileges the debris of contemporary culture over the aesthetic appreciation of ruins and the particular over the whole. Although the ruins in the Baroque tragic drama are predominantly representations of antique remains, the kind of rubble to which allegory attaches itself is made up of discarded commodities of modernity, which he meticulously surveys in his unfinished *Arcades Project* (1927-1940). Benjamin's allegorical sensibility operates as a mode of looking that reveals a utopian potential of these objects manifested through their material disintegration. The ruin, in Buck-Morss' formulation, "is the form in which the wish images of the past century appear, as rubble, in the present.

But it refers also to the loosened building blocks (both semantic and material) out of which a new order can be constructed" (212).

The same allegorical sensibility informs Benjamin's notions of photography, particularly his concept of the optical unconscious. Activating Freudian psychoanalysis as a frame of reference, the optical unconscious refers to a realm of reality unregistered by the naked eye but recorded by the optical device of the camera. Inasmuch as the human unconscious absorbs contents unavailable for conscious reflection, the camera operates as a therapist by bringing these hidden contents to the surface. As Benjamin writes,

> ... for it is another nature which speaks to the camera rather than to the eye: "other" above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious. ... Photography, with its devices of slow motion and enlargement, reveals the secret. It is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis. ("A Little History" 511-512)

For Benjamin, photography is a technological expedience capable of capturing "physiognomic aspects, image worlds, which dwell in the smallest things" ("A Little History" 512). Extracted from the flow of time by the optical device of the camera, these traces constitute a site of ruins similar to what he describes in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* as an "allegorical physiognomy of the nature-history," which he traces in the *Trauerspiel* (177). But such an extraction, Benjamin contends, is concomitant with conservation. In his essay "Central Park" (1937), in which he discusses Baudelaire's application of allegory, Benjamin writes: "That which is touched by the allegorical intention is torn from the context of life's interconnections: it is simultaneously shattered and conserved. Allegory attaches itself to rubble *(Trümmer).* It offers the image of transfixed unrest" (38). In other words, the act severing the object from its signifying context is the very means of its conservation.

Thus the Benjaminian way of viewing a photograph requires, as Mika Elo argues, that one reads it "as a presentation that is capable of creating new contexts, or – to distance ourselves from the textual metaphor – new configurations. We can say that the 'optical unconscious' (insofar as its model is the Freudian unconscious) is not manifested in the form of symbols. Rather, its mode of self-presentation is allegorical" (Elo). This potential of new arrangements of meaning is what Buck-Morss implies by her reference to "loosened building blocks" as a shared property of both allegory and ruins (212). Shattered and conserved by the unconscious optics of the camera, the physical details laid bare in the photograph serve as portals to "image worlds," hidden recesses of space and time, rendered accessible through the medium of photography (Benjamin, "A Little History" 512). Benjamin's allegorical mode of looking is thus helpful to conceptualise the optical unconscious as a repository of ruins where the past lingers on materially, as it were, rather than a linear sequence.

A similar allegorical sensibility can be traced in Ulrich Baer's adoption of a Democritean, as opposed to a Heraclitean view of the world in his approach to photography. While Heraclitus visualises time as a flowing river and history as an unfolding narrative, Democritus conceptualises the world "as occurring in bursts and explosions, as the rainfall of reality, ... [it] privileges the moment rather than the story, the event rather than the unfolding, particularity rather than generality" (Baer 5). Baer reads photographs "from *within* the illusion of an isolated moment rather than simply regard them as interruptions in the evolution of time" (6), which resonates with Benjamin's conceptualisation of allegory's attachment to rubble as an image of "transfixed unrest" ("Central Park" 38). What happens to this allegorical terrain once the photograph is brought back to the place where it was taken and matched up with the physical details that it depicts? If the ruins harboured by the photograph are virtual traces severed from their temporal and spatial contexts, reconnecting these traces with their material counterparts yields new configurations of the ruin, to which I turn next.

Rephotography

Initially called "repeat photography" (Senf 17) and used as a scientific tool to document changes in urban and natural landscapes, rephotography has been used by geologists and geographers since the mid-1970s (van Gelder and Westgeest 231, Klett, "Repeat Photography"). Repeat photography consists in taking a series of photographs at the same location, depicting the same urban sites or natural landscapes over intervals of time. [2] Another technique of rephotography frames the old and the new photograph within

a layered photograph, as exemplified by the work of Mark Klett, who has carried out projects in San Francisco, Barcelona and, most prominently, in the American West, walking in the footsteps of such renowned landscape photographers as Ansel Adams, Eadweard Muybridge and William Bell.

The writer Rebecca Solnit accompanied Klett and his associate Byron Wolfe on a rephotographic exploration of the Yosemite Valley. She surmises that

> rephotography is a marvelous and unique means of investigation not only of what a place once was but who the photographer was who made that photograph in some vanished time. By standing in the same place at the same time of day and year (which is necessary to get the angle of the light right) you return to the site of the photographer's choices – how he went onto the very lip of a cliff, what he chose to crop out and what he chose to show of the landscape that could be represented so many other ways, what time of day and year he was there, and where and when his photographs are in relation to each other. (Klett et al., *Yosemite in Time* x-xi)

Retracing the photographer's steps and assuming his vantage point establish a nexus between photograph and landscape, photographer and rephotographer, as well as the event captured by the old photograph and the event of taking a new one. This polyvalent nexus is just as much facilitated by a range of optical devices as it is the result of an embodied experience of presences and absences. Details in the landscape that correspond with those in the old photograph affirm the persistence of certain material objects in the landscape and simultaneously underline the irreversibility of time.

In a famous passage of *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes contemplates Alexander Gardner's 1865 photograph of a young man awaiting his execution. Reflecting on his feelings upon looking at the image Barthes writes: "I read at the same time: *This will be* and *this has been*; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake. By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future. What *pricks* me is the discovery of this equivalence" (96). Barthes' formulation marks a liminal temporality wedged between what "will be" and what "has been," for what he sees in the photo gestures toward a future that has, from his temporal standpoint, already happened. This experience of an anterior future gains a spatial and material dimension in rephotography. As the old photograph is mapped onto its physical background it renders the environment an imprint of what Barthes describes as "*this has been*" and anchors this sensation in space: this has been *here*.

This sense of hereness that transpires from Barthes' formulation of photographic indexicality transferred to space evokes recent re-conceptualisations of indexicality as a performative, rather than an ontological quality (Green and Lowry, Gunning, Elkins, Batchen). In this sense, David Green and Joanna Lowry emphasise not only the existential relationship between photograph and its referent but, reiterating J.L. Austin's theory of speech acts, they underline the performative function of the camera in claiming the event that it captures in the form of the photograph. As they argue, the "frame is not so much a delimitation of a semiotic space, but more an arbitrary event, a performance, a gesture that points to the scene and in doing so points to our inability to read it" (60). Understanding indexicality as a performative gesture of pointing, rather than merely an indicator of the photograph as a material trace sustained at an affective register, is helpful to account for the complex visual and corporeal experience rephotography offers.

Recycled into the landscape where it has been taken, the old photograph operates as an interface between the rephotographer and the landscape. The geographer Edward Casey calls this liminal realm place:

> Body and landscape present themselves as coeval epicenters around which particular places pivot and radiate. They are, at the very least, the bounds of places. In my embodied being I am *just at* a place as its inner boundary; a surrounding landscape, on the other hand, is *just beyond* that place as its outer boundary. Between the two boundaries – and very much as a function of their differential interplay – implacement occurs. Place is what takes place between body and landscape. (*Getting Back into Place* 29)

We have seen how Benjamin's allegorical mode of looking and his notion of the optical unconscious allows for the conceptualisation of the ruin in photographic terms. The ruin is the imprint of the

photographed event preserved within the optical unconscious. Casey's formulation of place as a kind of force field radiating between body and landscape enables us to conceive of the transformation of this ruin in the rephotographic process. Holding up the old photograph against the landscape constitutes an act of pointing, a performance of an indexical connection, which forges a phenomenological bond between the rephotographer and the landscape. It is a ritual of implacement, whereby space is experienced as temporally layered. The optical unconscious starts "leaking" as its components match up with their material counterparts in the landscape. The rephotographer's gaze, in other words, operates as a vehicle for these photographically preserved traces to affirm their indexical relation to their material counterparts. If, as Jacques Derrida asserts, "[t]he trace has, properly speaking, no place, for effacement belongs to the very structure of the trace" (156), rephotography turns the trace as an indexical sign into the very instrument of place-making. For place, as a liminal realm between body and landscape, emerges as the implacement of effacement, that is to say, through the embodied experience of the absent presence of the photographed event in the landscape. Energised by the rephotographer's field of vision and embodied experience of place, the event depicted in the old photograph lays claim to the landscape and marks material details that survived the passage of time as ruins of the photographed event.

Place, in this sense, infiltrates and transforms what is "just beyond" it. Mapped onto corresponding details of the landscape the old photograph renders the latter a material reverberation of the event that transpired in its midst. As such, it corresponds to Alain Badiou's "evental site," an essentially paradoxical notion, which he explains through a reference to Mallarmé's poem about shipwreck:

> The paradox of an evental site is that it can only be recognized on the basis of what it does not present in the situation in which it is presented. ... Mallarme brilliantly presents this paradox by composing, on the basis of the site – the deserted Ocean – a phantom multiple, which metaphorizes the inexistence of which the site is the presentation. Within the scenic frame, you have nothing apart from the Abyss, the sea and sky being indistinguishable. Yet from the "flat incline" of the sky and the "yawning deep" of the waves, the image of a ship is composed, sails and hull, annulled as soon as invoked, such that the desert of the site "quite inwardly sketches ... a vessel" which, itself, does not exist, being the figurative interiority of which the empty scene indicates, using its resources alone, the probable absence. ... For every event, apart from being localized by its site, initiates the latter's ruin *with regard to the situation*, because it retroactively names its inner void. (192)

The site, in this sense, is the landscape transformed into a ruin. [3] In Mark Currie's reading of Badiou, "the event possesses a 'there-has-been' which must be reconstructed – a system of clues 'whose placement can be unified by one hypothesis alone as to what has happened'" (74). In much the same way that the sunken vessel takes shape in Mallarmé's representation of the sea, the old photograph in the rephotographer's hand transforms the landscape into a ruin, which harbours the event in the form of a void.

The effort of retracing the steps of a photographer and experiencing the landscape enfolded by the past culminate in the taking of a new photograph of the same landscape, which will ultimately be published and circulated. Like the sea in Mallarmé's poem, the landscape that rephotography locks within a new optical unconscious reverberates the dynamics of place and, by doing so, it yields new configurations of the ruin. These configurations are defined by the techniques used to combine the old and the new photographs. While positioning the old and new photograph side by side – as it is traditionally done in repeat photography – allows for the demonstration of changes that occur over a time span, superimposed arrangements leave more room for experimentation insofar as they depart from the Heraclitean view of time as a flow. The model that Klett and his associates follow is that of Jorge Luis Borges, for whom "time was not a single river but something always branching into every possible outcome; time was a tree growing at infinite speed to produce infinite branches, so that there were many pasts and more presents and this very moment is begetting many futures" (Klett et al., *Yosemite in Time* 17).

As much as this arrangement of images resonates with Baer's Democritean approach to photography, it is also an inherently allegorical one. The layers of superimposed images form a palimpsest, not unlike the accumulated emblems of the Baroque allegoricists that attracted Benjamin's attention. In "then and now" configurations the images form a sequence along a temporal continuum. A lamppost at a street

corner that appears in one photograph may reappear in the other one in a more weathered condition or perhaps removed completely. This possibility is withheld by superimposing one photographic layer onto the other, which makes the image on the top blot out a part of the photograph below it. In Klett and Wolfe's superimposition of William Bell's photographs on a contemporary representation of a rock formation in Arizona there is no room for the comparison. Bell's 1872 black and white images of the mesa are like jolts of time wedged into the field of the colour photo. Accordingly, the borders between the old and the new image come to the fore as spatiotemporal fault lines where continuities and discontinuities are divulged.

Figure 1: Mark Klett and Byron Wolfe, *Rock Formations on the Road to Lee's Ferry, AZ* (2008).
Left Inset: William Bell, *Plateau North of the Colorado River near the Paria* (1872).
Right Inset: William Bell, *Headlands North of the Colorado River* (1872).
www.klettandwolfe.com/

The objects that are "cut" by this fault line bear testament to their existence in both temporal planes and constitute a new kind of ruin. The lines of sediment in Bell's photos of the mesa are seamlessly aligned with Klett and Wolfe's capture of the same rock, evidencing their unchanged condition over a hundred years. In a natural setting, however, such correspondences are not surprising. In quickly changing urban environments such as San Francisco, the city that Klett rephotographed on the basis of photographs documenting the immediate aftermath of the 1906 earthquake, the contrast between the past and the present is often more dramatic. The scientific precision of Klett's rephotography projects is, however, rarely to be found in the work of unprofessional practitioners of the superimposition-technique. Instead, amateur rephotographers, who share their work on the Internet, resort to different techniques to hide and expose the fault lines between the old and the new. In these projects the figure of the ruin comes to the fore as a spectacle – a factor largely responsible for the popularity of this photographic genre on the Internet. In the two case studies that follow I will explore the affective registers activated by these spectacles.

The Fingerprint

Launched in May 2011 as an experiment by 21-year-old Canadian Taylor Jones, the Tumblr blog *Dear Photograph* went viral overnight. The website invites visitors to find an old photograph to which they relate personally, track down the location where it was taken, hold it up and take a new image of the same setting. Once the new photo is uploaded on the website, it is to be accompanied by a caption addressing it as "Dear Photograph." Implicitly attesting to the indexical power he ascribes to digital photography, Jones stipulates that the photographer's hand remains visible so as to prove "that you stood at the original spot where the old photo was taken" (Jones, *Dear Photograph* 5). From the numerous images he receives via email he posts selected ones on his site. Jones came to the idea by accident, while looking at a photo of his youngest brother sitting at the same spot at the kitchen table that he happened to be looking at. He instantly took a photograph with the old one in his hand and shared it on the Internet. Because Tumblr requires captions to images, he added short letters dedicated to the photographs he posted, which prompted the name *Dear Photograph* (Jones, "Dear Photograph: Taylor Jones at TEDxWaterloo"). Within weeks the blog received a quarter of a million hits and he was ABC News' man of the week in July 2011 (Donvan et al.). The next year he published an album by the same title, featuring two hundred images selected from the website.

The majority of the images come from traditional family albums from all around the world but primarily form North America. Some of them are black and white, others feature colours that have already faded into shades of orange, while others sport the typical white frames from the Polaroid era. Significantly, the visible hand is not only a synecdochic sign of the rephotographer – as though a fingerprint – but it also adds a corporeal dimension. The texture of the skin invites speculations as to the rephotographer's gender and age, funnelling the viewer's perception of the environment through meanings we read into the physical characteristics of a hand. The imperfections in the alignment of the old picture with the background only enhance the role of rephotography as a personal quest. Consequently, the rephotographer's corporeal experience of *genius loci* as "here" strongly reverberates in the experience of the same place transmitted through the new photograph.

As a case study to visualise this dynamic through the figure of the ruin I take one of the images on Jones' site.

Figure 2: *Dear Photograph* (18 August 2014)
dearphotograph.com/post/95097848268/dear-photograph-the-house-has-gone-through-many

The digital photo frames an image, taken in the late 1970s, depicting a child and a dog in front of a stoop. The different colour of the wall surface in the old image indicates the time difference between the two photographic layers, which the rephotographer acknowledges in her caption: "Dear Photograph,The house has gone through many colors since that day about 36 years ago. So much has changed but so much has stayed the same too. Even though Nanny is gone, it's still 'going to Nanny's house' when I travel back home.- Dawn" (Jones, *Dear Photograph*). The caption reveals that the child in the old photo is the same person whose hand is visible in the new one. The original stoop and the railing closer to the child seamlessly dovetail with their counterparts in the new photo, but the imperfect alignment of the door and the railing further back inadvertently reveals the same detail in two temporalities. Besides prying open a "then and now" sequence in the superimposition, this glitch evinces Dawn's embodied effort to take the new picture and dramatizes the sense of place. Her fingers, as though making a fingerprint, testify to the personal nature of her quest, as well as the corporeal connection thus forged between the two temporalities.

Her caption to the photo construes her quest as a nostalgic one in the literal sense of the word. The house, even if it has never been her home *per se,* marks a spatial and an emotional reference point (*nostos*) projected in the idyllic world of childhood, which she longingly ponders (*algia*). Her fingers also gesture toward this dimension in that they accentuate her desire to relive the past through engaging with the materiality of the present. Svetlana Boym terms this kind of longing "reflective nostalgia." It "dwells in *algia,*" and "lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history..." (41). The ruins, in this case, are the stairs, the railings, the wall surface and the door; mundane details called upon as material witnesses to the event captured in Dawn's old photograph and, by extension, her nostalgic memories of visiting Nanny. Correspondingly, the railing's double appearance in the old and new image rhymes with yet another doubled detail: Dawn's fingers and those of the child in the old photo are of the same hand. The former, like the doubled detail of the railing, is exposed as the ruin of the latter.

The Blur

Sergey Larenkov's *Link to the Past* essentially differs from Jones' project. A Russian sea pilot and photographer, Larenkov has a deep passion for the history of the Second World War. Launched in 2010, his site is an ever-growing collection of images featuring his native St. Petersburg under siege, as well as war-torn Stalingrad, Sevastopol, Moscow and Berlin, to name only a few. In his rephotography projects Larenkov uses Photoshop to blur the boundaries between old, documentary photos and the new photograph in such a way that the black and white tones of the vintage images infiltrate the colours of the new image. With the visual evisceration of borders the act of visiting the site that transpires from the images on Jones' site is absent here. Instead, the old photo seems to emerge from within the new. As corresponding details disappear into the digital fog of spatiotemporal liminality, the viewer is lost as to where the past ends and the present begins. With the brutality of war gradually and insidiously blending with the mundane routines of modern life, the old picture feels less a photograph and more a pernicious force welling up from below the surface of the metropolis.

Although this technique is shared by a growing number of rephotographers pursuing similar war-related projects, [4] Larenkov's work has received by far the greatest publicity, including an interview in the *Daily Mail* (O'Keeffe) and *The Huffington Post* (Vincent), among numerous other blogs and websites. Undoubtedly, the series of seventieth anniversary commemorations of the Second World War over the past years have contributed to the success of Larenkov's project. *Link to the Past* has attracted visitors from all corners of the world, one-quarter of whom (almost 155,000) from the United States. Although the bulk of his work is focused on battlefields in the former Soviet Union, Russian visitors are only the third (after Spain) on the list.

Figure 3: Leningrad 1941 / St. Petersburg 2012. Victims of shelling in the Glazovskaya Street (now St. Constantina Zaslonova).
sergey-larenkov.livejournal.com/?skip=20&tag=Блокада

In one of his photographs of the lengthy siege of Leningrad Larenkov combines an image of dead bodies

lying in the street in the immediate aftermath of the German shelling of the city with a photo of the same street seventy-one years later. The cobblestone street and the ruined facades appear as though emerging uninvited from within the contemporary streetscape. With its borders blurred, the horrific scene of the past materialises as a stain infiltrating the peaceful surroundings of the present. Although the blur is a clear indication of visual manipulation, Larenkov's collage exudes an air of realism that the memory scholar James Young, in a different context, describes as a "reverse reality effect." While in *Dear Photograph,* imperfections in alignment underline the rephotographer's corporeal presence unaided by technologies other than their digital camera, here the blur facilitates the perception of continuities rather than glitches and differences. "The indistinct lines don't absorb the eye as sharp images might; instead the soft focus deflects the mind's eye away from the object and inward, back to itself" (Young 52). As a result, Larenkov's use of the blur renders the border between black and white and colour, past and present ever more porous. With the boarded-up storefronts and the damaged façade further back smoothly merging with the present-day appearance of the building, the blur instils the illusion of the past inescapably encroaching upon the present. The gesture of the man in the old photograph bearing witness to the dead civilians is, in a sense, replicated by the new façade, the new shop windows and the asphalt that are called upon as material witnesses to what happened there during the siege. This "double witnessing" – performed by the man in the old photo and the materiality of the façade in the new one – ultimately forms a triangle with the viewer looking at Larenkov's photograph, pulled into an act of witnessing.

If the richness of details in the optical unconscious is enhanced by the photograph's sharpness, the blur stifles this potential. At the same time, the blur's reverse reality effect grants an air of immanence to the transformation of the present-day streetscape into the ruin of the event captured by the black and white photo. The corresponding details that would normally allow the optical unconscious to pour into the landscape are here not so much perceived as they are imagined by the viewer. The edge of the pavement, the horizontal lines of moulding and the grid of windows produce a visual rhythm that guides the viewer's eye through the blurred terrain and augments the sensation of the past as uncannily fitting into the present.

Conclusion

This article has adopted a Benjaminian view of ruins. Establishing a connection between ruins and photography by way of conceptualising the optical unconscious through Benjamin's analogy between allegory and ruins, it has established that the ruin is that of the photographed event captured by the unconscious optics of the camera. Rephotography unlocks the optical unconscious and pours its contents back into the landscape. Details that weathered the passage of time are called upon as material witnesses. This new configuration of the ruin manifests itself as a phenomenological disposition, an embodied experience of the landscape as a material imprint of a photographically preserved event. Key to this experience is the sensation of the photographed event as an absent presence in space.

The mesa in Arizona that appears in William Bell's 1872 photograph looks back at Klett and Wolfe as a witness to Bell's visit to the site over a century ago. It is a ruin of that visit in much the same way that the railing at the stoop of Nanny's house is the ruin of a snapshot that shows Dawn standing there. Likewise, a St. Petersburg building is the ruin not only of German shelling but also, in this sense, of the photographic event that captured civilian deaths in front of it. Rephotography grants mnemonic agency to what Benjamin recognised in photographs as "the smallest things" ("A Little History" 512) contained by the optical unconscious. But in the same way that we enfold photographs within narrative textures once we imagine what came before and what happened after the click of the camera, so do the smallest things that rephotography animates invite a variety of affective engagements, the full potential of which is yet to be seen.

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American cities and architecture, as well as the memory of the Allied bombing of Budapest during the Second World War. In a broader sense, his scholarly work revolves around the juncture of literature, visual culture, and cultural memory in American and Eastern European contexts.

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Endnotes

1. In her book *Structures of Appearing: Allegory and the Work of Literature* Brenda Machosky demonstrates the material orientation of allegory in great detail.

2. Through his documentation of urban decay in Detroit, Chicago and the South Bronx since the 1980s the Chilean-born American photographer Camilo José Vergara has distinguished himself as a preeminent practitioner of this technique.

3. Here, I am departing from Casey, for whom site is "anti-place hovering precariously over the abyss of no-place" (*The Fate of Place* 186).

4. See, for instance, the Flickr sites *Ghosts of History* by Jo Hedwig Teeuwisse and *Blitz Ghosts: The Baedeker Blitz on Norwich* by Nick J. Stone.

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