

THE ENCOUNTER WITH PHOTOGRAPHS IN THE WORK OF MAX SEBALD: THREE MODEST PROPOSITIONS

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(i) Photographs radically change our relationship with ignorance.

To think of the photographs in Sebald's work as being documentary support, as authenticating evidence, seems to me to be misguided. The poignancy of the photograph is not so much that it brings us a knowledge that was in danger of being lost or forgotten, but that it brings us ignorance.

There are several senses in which photography taunts us with, and increases, our ignorance. First, as Vilém Flusser points out (*Pour une philosophie de la photographie*, 1996, 53), we live in a world in which information slowly unravels and disperses, according to the second law of thermodynamics. Mankind resists this natural entropy by storing and transmitting information. This is one of the principal tasks assigned to photography from the outset. We remember Baudelaire, in his Salon of 1859, asking photography to give up its aesthetic aspirations and stick to what it is best at: archiving the world: 'Let it save crumbling ruins from oblivion, books, engravings, and manuscripts, the prey of time, all those precious things, vowed to dissolution, which crave a place in the archives of our memories'. However, despite photographic museums, collections, etc., photography has itself become the instrument of this informational entropy. This is partly because, for the family snapper, what is stored is not the negative, but a single positive print. And it is partly because even though photographic archives exist, they have to be highly selective and their coherence and efficacy depend on systems of classification that might tend to defeat recuperation. Archives, paradoxically, are about the disappearance of photographs and about the failure of classification. Where would you put a photo of a picnic in Scotland in 1943? Under picnics? Scottish family life? Domestic events in 1943? And anyway, how do I know I am looking for it?

But there are other ways, too, in which the photograph brings an edge to ignorance. Unlike painting, photography must, in order to *make* its image, *exclude*, must *mask* the reality which does not enter the frame. Thus, in order to give knowledge, the photograph must, equally and oppositely, create an ignorance. Of course it tries to persuade us to forget this, to persuade us that what is taking place in the frame is *all* that is taking place. But the excluded blind field is only waiting its moment to return and haunt us.

Additionally, the existence of the photograph is characterized by a certain arbitrariness which the painting, in its assumed overall voluntariness is able to minimize. Why here and not there? Why now and not then? And, with more than a billion new photographs being taken every week, any photograph of anything may come to light at any time and potentially change our assessment of reality. Photographs are vulnerable, fragile objects and most of them are hidden from view. But we, by the same token, are vulnerable to photos, to their sudden emergences from the shadows, to shake the known world and put a different complexion on it.

Ignorance is an existential condition rather than a quantitative or statistical one. To know what one doesn't know is a healthy spur to find out. But that, erroneously, is to imply that ignorance itself is a measurable and finite thing. Put yourself in the following situation: the more I discover, the more, proportionately, my ignorance increases; the more I don't know, the more injustices I do, the more I misrepresent reality, the more prejudiced I am, the more unjustified is the store I put by what I *do* know, the photographs I *do* have. Sebald's photos don't fill holes, they create them, and his histories (of herrings, or Chinese emperors, or Edward Fitzgerald) make us feel less sure of ourselves.

(ii) Photographs resist text

Photographs cannot be illustrations of text, that is, images which are brought into existence expressly to serve text and to contribute to the movement of narrative itself. Photographs resist text, because (i) they predate text, even if, in the chronology of composition, they postdate it; and (ii) they are already beyond narrative. By the former, I mean this: either the narrator has a photograph and works it into a narrative, builds a narrative around it, or takes a photograph expressly to accompany a piece of narrative. But even in the latter case, the narrative can only serve the photograph and not vice versa; because the photograph is a primary material, a raw material, in a way that writing cannot be. This is why a photograph cannot come to authenticate something that has been written.

Narrative is designed to give an account of what is not there, of absences. Language naturally generalizes, codifies and conventionalizes; this a necessary prerequisite of its comprehensibility. Language thus relies on readers, each with their own fund of personal experience and perceptual idiosyncrasy to supply that singularity, that inimitability, by which language achieves its affective intensity. But when language describes what is already there, such as a photograph, before the reader's eyes, this process of readerly translation, or personalization, is blocked and language is left only with its capacity to codify and conventionalise the singularity the photograph presents it with. It is not sufficient to say of a photo-portrait, for instance, that it shows a man wearing a tie. Because it loses the inimitable way, the singular way, in which that particular tie is worn by that particular person at that particular time. We cannot achieve a description sufficiently meticulous to capture that magic, as Sebald himself acknowledges, when he says of his own description of a photograph of the Russian ambassador to Berlin with his family (1860): 'Thus the casual *raffinement* of this scene reminds one of the insufficiency of literary and, to be sure, historical descriptions'. Sebald's very choice of a French word here – *raffinement* - expresses his frustration, his reaching for that extra expressive edge.

With photography, we are peculiarly shut out of the image; we have no access to it; it has already happened and nothing further can happen to it. It is quite beyond our control. The photograph presents us with a now that is then, a here that is there, something that is profoundly unaware of us and of any text that might be attached to it. One may feel that Lowestoft has gone into terminal decline, one may be disheartened by it. But a

photograph of a terrace of houses at Lowestoft already belongs to another world, and could not care a fig for our opinion.

Photographs, then, constantly and mesmerisingly withdraw into their own singularity. And if this is something that puts them out of reach of text, so does the photograph's stilling of life. The stilling of life remains a strange mystery. A film still comes to us bearing a futurity, a desire to pick up the thread of a narrative. A still photograph, on the other hand, wants, it seems, to remain for ever caught in its moment, mummified, paradoxically to detach itself from the flow of history in order to be history. The history created by photography is not a sequence, but a swarm of splinters, each with a history locked into them. The only possible history is an alternative history, a constantly deflected history, a history generated by associationism and the autobiography of the historian, a history not of sequence but of correspondences.

I look upon Sebald's description of the Waterloo Panorama in *The Rings of Saturn* as a delineation of the three stages of his own construction of the historical memory: first, there is the general account that we have inherited from official history, clear but inanimate, without any direct, personal links: 'We, the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and still we do not know how it was' (1998, 125); then, we try to get nearer specific events, episodes; this is perhaps when we look at photographs. Sebald's listening to the account of the battle in Flemish, only fragments of which he understands, is like looking at the fragments and splinters that photographs are: 'Of the various circumstances and vicissitudes described I understood no more than the odd phrase' (125). Finally, there is the retreat into the self, the recourse to personal vision and association, which draws one into fiction: 'Only when I had shut my eyes, I well recall, did I see a cannonball smash through a row of poplars at an angle, sending the green branches flying in tatters. And then I saw Fabrizio, Stendhal's young hero, wandering about the battlefield, [...]' (126). About the second phase, looking at photographs, we might say two things; these photographs are like the surfacings of history's own involuntary memory, the offerings of happy providence; but as they emerge, there is a countervailing tendency for so much else to have disappeared that these providential bits and pieces will not cohere. This is how Michael Hamburger writes the experience of his German childhood: 'The leather seats in Grandfather's Buick, Hasensprung tramstop in the Grunewald, the Baltic coast, Heringsdorf, a sand dune surrounded by pure nothingness, the sunlight and how it fell... Whenever a shift in our spiritual life occurs and fragments such as these surface, we believe we can remember. But in reality, of course, memory fails us. Too many buildings have fallen down, too much rubble has been heaped up, the moraines and deposits are insuperable' (1998, 177).

(iii) Photography's instantaneousness is hugely concerned with time, but has no concern for memory.

What remains curious in all this is that the commemorative function of photography has nothing to do with photography's most vital acquisition: its instantaneousness. The snapshot, the family photograph, have remained embedded in what nineteenth-century

technology could already provide; no one has really thought to follow Lartigue's practice and photograph relations jumping down a flight of steps, or cornering at speed in a home-made vehicle. Instantaneousness does not remember; it reveals; even in the posed portrait we might discover, through the instantaneousness of the camera, Benjamin's optical unconscious, psyche-inhabited facial expressions, twitches, that the sitter has tried to repress, but which burst forth unbidden. Sebald's photographs rarely have the necessary clarity to be suggestive in this way. It is not surprising that instantaneousness plays little part in Sebald's gamut of photographs.

Aside from the capturing of moving objects, there are two ways in which instantaneousness imprints itself on the photograph: (i) through mistakes or eccentricities in their taking (unwanted reflected light, a nudged camera, double exposure) – in short, the unpredictable – and (ii) through focus. Sharpness of focus, and more especially sharpness of focus dramatized by differential focusing, acts out the pressure of time on the image, the crystallization of a particular instant, the ability of the instant to crystallize life. Immediately a photograph loses focus or eccentricity, as Sebald's photos do, temporal pressure and the urge to crystallize disappear and photographs float more freely, less self-assertively, more assimilably, demanding less to be located precisely in time. And this does, peculiarly, seem to create more possibility of negotiation with them, simply because they begin to occupy a position closer to the borderline between the real and the imaginary, the literal and figurative, the actual/past and the possible/future

We have said that photographs withdraw peculiarly into a life that they alone possess, to which we have no access; *we* cannot alter *them*. BUT they have the power to alter *us*, who remember them or remember through them. The future of photographs, their capacity to have a future, not to have stopped being, lies in us, who think that our business with them is far from finished. Photographs, under this dispensation, are not passive, do not recede into a disintegrative past, do not increasingly surrender life-value to sign-value; on the contrary, one might say, that their power grows, that they cast longer shadows. In this role, photographs become the servants of memory, enlarging and revitalising those who look at them. In this role, photographs act as mediators between spectators and their inner selves, allow us to become a part of lives we had no part in, not because the photograph has suddenly opened its doors, where before it closed them, but because it is able to deflect our own imaginations along paths that we had not thought we could fruitfully tread. In Sebaldian terms, one must walk into the labyrinth before one can find one's way to one's destination; there is no direct route.