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MC 25 - TA: David Bering-Porter
Topic #2 - Barthes and Benjamin on the Photograph in Modernity
due 5/8/07

A Real Image: The Disorder of Modernity
Tracing the Photograph through Barthes and Benjamin

Photography (please excuse that vague expression) is so tightly woven from the severed threads of paradox that it may seem practically inconceivable for such a concept to bear a concrete form. Yet, on the contrary, of course, this maddening impotence plagues only the contemplative essentialist; in truth, Photography's flight from comprehension effectively clears the ground before the ever-rising tide of its reproductive orphans: the onslaught of photographs. Photography as concept does little but subtend the high water mark of these phenomena. Here lies another example of Photography's well documented dual nature. On the one hand, there is the failed desire to record Photography as a singular, transitory object in history (to invert the camera function); that desire *must* fail, due to the reflexive nature of the photographic mechanism: a photograph of a photograph is merely the same photograph (and also, merely another photograph). On the other hand, society maintains an almost blind faith in the honesty of the photographic image, or rather a willingness to even see *through* photography, as though it were transparent, which would appear to belie the skepticism and reification ingrained in the former approach.

The photographic camera is a technology - a tool, which, in all styles of its paradigmatic form, offers the user the ability to record a specific space and time (the objects encountered there and then) through the mechanical reproduction of its likeness, achieved by an indexical imprinting of light. The photographic camera thus not only inscribes a trace of the Real, but in fact does so in the form of an iconic resemblance; this confusion of the orders of the Real and the Imaginary constitutes the heart of the photographic conundrum. The camera is, at base, a tool which allows the user to link the orders of the Real and the Imaginary, in fact to pull the Real *into* the Imaginary, and vice-versa.

Barthes relates in *Camera Lucida* that, during the course of his failed theoretical investigation into the essence of Photography, he encountered a crucial stopping point which prevented him from pinpointing the medium's ontological existence. He writes that the "source of this disorder" was that "the Photograph repeats to infinity what has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially."¹ Barthes interprets the power of a photograph to be a sort of transgression of the existential state of the passage of time, and thus it is the indexical trace, the touch of "the absolute Particular,"² which he prizes overall - and which forestalls his classification of Photography according to any sort of universal: "sovereign Contingency"³ speaks anew with every snap of the shutter.

Of course, however, the iconicity of the photograph plays just as crucial a role as does the indexicality in Barthes' further analysis in *Camera Lucida*, where he details the rote intentionalities of the *studium* and the unexpected emergences of the *punctum*. Barthes mentions briefly, "The Photograph belongs to that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both: ... desire and its object... This fatality (no photograph without *something* or *someone*) involves Photography in the vast disorder of the world."⁴ Here Barthes alludes to the resemblance of the photograph, in tandem with its indexical trace - these are, basically, the "two leaves" - the iconic image and the indexical image. It is the notion that a photograph must be a photograph *of* (an object) - and therefore, iconicity based upon an habituated (à la Benjamin) paradigm of image structure (focal length, exposure, composition, etc.) is an augmentation of the apparatus predicated by that necessity. In the present age of digital simulation, this necessity of the referent is no longer

1 Barthes, p.4

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p.6

prevalent (though the image paradigm appears to remain dominant), but this will be addressed later. In any case, it is important to note that the imperative of the object (the referent) need not be in the mind of the photographer whilst taking the picture. The referent is rather a demand of the technology, coupled with the desire (as Barthes points out) of the spectator. The technology of the camera depends, in its primary manifestation, only on the presence of the camera in a specific time and space while the aperture is open: that is the imperative of the referent - in a word, the referent is the *event* of the exposure in any instance, and it does not necessarily predicate some "photogenic" object to be in front of the lens. On the other hand, the camera is easily, even naturally adaptive to the cultural practice of photographing certain objects (and certain subjects who become objects for the lens). This is the goal of mechanical reproduction. As Benjamin writes, "Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring 'closer' spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction."⁵

While Barthes demonstrates (and celebrates) the induction of the Real into the Imaginary (the trace into the image), Benjamin shows how the Imaginary is inducted into the realm of the Real. This is a result of the proliferation of photographic images and imaging, a result of all things saying cheese. Benjamin writes, "The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well."⁶ Whereas Barthes emphasizes the indexical nature of the photograph in order to aggrandize the *punctum* of his images (the poignant, traumatic indexicality shining through the overdetermined cultural structuration of resemblance), Benjamin emphasizes the iconic nature of the photograph in order to explain how it actually reshapes reality (base perception). Though the arguments are opposed at times on their tangents, their premise - that the photograph represents a conjunction, a confusion of the Real and the Imaginary - is the same.

Benjamin pictures the basic change engendered by the practice of photography as the loss of the "aura." This loss is at first apparent in the photograph itself: as the photograph is an object unto itself, it retains an eternal distance from the referent, and cannot share "its presence in time and space"⁷ (to be clear, this notion is not opposed to that of the trace - it is rather a product of it, as the trace is not exactly the referent itself, but instead the Death of the referent). Again, the paradox of Photography - here, it is Zeno's paradox: according to Benjamin, the basic desire of modern society is to close the distance between the individual and the objects of its perception - and so mechanical reproduction, such as that achieved by the photograph, "enables the original to meet the beholder halfway"⁸ - yet this necessarily means that "the presence in time and space" - the aura - is lost in the reception of the reproduction. And at the same time, "the situations into which the product of mechanical reproduction can be brought may not touch the actual work of art, yet the quality of its presence is always depreciated." Benjamin calls this a "tremendous shattering of tradition" - which is the destruction of the cultural orders of the Imaginary and Symbolic surrounding the cult object. This leaves only the Real, and it is the first step in how the image begins to alter its referent (an act of violence?).

Benjamin writes that the "the adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality is a process of unlimited scope."⁹ The basis of the relation between subjects and their reality, to Benjamin, can be noted in the structure of the economy. According to Benjamin, the new mode of perception of the masses, which he calls "distraction," is reflected in the commodification, and thus the universalization, of all objects under late capitalism. He writes, "To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose 'sense of the universal quality of things' has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object."¹⁰ The commodity is an important figure, because it is the next step in the alteration of the world of objects, towards an

5 Benjamin, p.225

6 Ibid., p.224

7 Ibid., p.222

8 Ibid., p.222

9 Ibid., p.225

10 Ibid., p.221

injection of the Imaginary into the Real. The question at this point is whether the world of objects will collapse entirely into a world of commodity - which is closely linked to the world of pure perception, as the commodity is predicated as a kind of spectacle: practically an imaginary object. Guy Debord writes, "The spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life... the world we see is the world of the commodity."¹¹

Benjamin's argument is based on the cultural desires of society, the paradoxical desire of presence through mediation. This is overwhelmingly evident in contemporary times, with the dominance not just of television, and moreover, live television with its various methods for producing a sense of immediacy, but also now with the maturation of the internet, and the myriad ways to connect in "real-time" with subjects and objects from around the globe. The only impedance to these technologies, which yet retain the confusion of Real and Imaginary as merely points of confluence (as in the photograph), with lines of repercussion extending beyond those sites, is the speed of hardware connections. It is not inconceivable that the limitations of hardware (the impedance of the Real) could soon be surmounted so that the question of the Death of the referent ("sovereign Contingency") would no longer be applicable. This would be the engenderment a new order of pure Simulacrum which would be the product of the total convergence of the Real and the Imaginary. "The mode of human sense perception changes,"¹² indeed.

11 Debord, p.29

12 Ibid., p.224