Footprints: Between indicative persistance and uncertainty

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I) Persistence.

In his well-known essay "The Work of Art in Its Age of Mechanical Reproduction", written in 1936, Walter Benjamin binds the decisive and radical transformation of the XIXth Century art theory with the transition experienced by the images (of art) from cult to exhibition value (Benjamin, 2008). This alteration would have been managed by the historical apparition of photography and film as modes of production and reproduction of images. Their outspring would impose a new regime in the way the world (not just the art world) is experienced, which would postpone the auratic distance of rituals while leaving room for politics.

We could synthesize the link established by Benjamin among technical innovations and politics by the use of three different points. Firstly, the optical unconscious revealed by photography and film editing would impose a tactile perception of images that, by its opposition to the contemplative distance of the genres of the aesthetic experience in traditional art (painting and sculpture), would affect the spectator by displaying both the visual nature of his oneiric universe and all details of his everyday experience hitherto unnoticed. This phenomenology of things would rescue for the modern subject everything repressed or ignored, thus reconfiguring his historical subjectivity: following Benjamin's citation of George Duhamel (Benjamin, 2008, p. 80), contemporary man can no longer think what he wants to think when facing cinema, since moving images take the place of his very conscious thoughts. Secondly, photography, and particularly film, would reveal the masses' desire to be reproduced, to subvert their alienated relation to technique as workers: Chaplin's subversive comic attitude in *Modern Times* would find its revolutionary version in the inexpressive estrangement of the masses in Russian avant-garde film, which would be, in turn, antagonistic to the expressive masses of Fascist cinema, where ownership relations remained unaltered. Finally, both photography and cinema would facilitate the self-representation of proletarian subjects, which had already enhanced the development of printed news in the XIXth Century: if this fact was making it easier for readers to act as writers (a thought already addressed by Benjamin in his essay "The Author as Producer", published two years before and inspired in the activity of the productivist artist Sergei Tretiakov's in the Kolhoj "The Communist Lighthouse"), Benjamin pointed out that part of the acting crew in Russian cinema consisted, in fact, of actual workers interpreting themselves in their own production space. Benjamin would confront this exaltation of Russian cinema with the typical aesthetization of politics of Nazi films, where assembling of bodies in space (let us remember Leni Riefenstahl's filmed documents of political acts) conditioned the spontaneity of the event to its registration on film.

In his dichotomy between the aesthetization of Fascist politics and the politicization of art by Communism, Benjamin paid no attention either to the fact that, by 1936, Russia's avant-garde cinema had already surrendered to the impositions of Stalinist documentary and its constitutive fake (that participated in the aesthetization of politics as much as Fascism did), nor to the fact that from its beginnings, this new aesthetic project had already participated in a singular vision of history, in the construction of the image of a new man who would transcend the reflection of proletarian subjectivity. In this sense, beyond his ideological positioning, we should reconsider if the purpose of Benjamin's technical approach to photography (and its dynamic extension, cinema) was not a product of an epistemological reason. Despite his awareness of the reactive and instrumental uses of technical reproduction, Benjamin's progressive interpretation of media is understood as an indexical component for their comprehension. Photography, as the register of the film emanated from the surface of the object, would have found in film montage its decisive prolongation, which would have offered the public a tactile approach to their knowledge, mediated not by the inherent distance of knowledge, but by the melancholic wisdom that characterizes the kind of subject fond of the object illustrated in Benjamin's "The Origin of German Trauespierl" (Benjamin, 2006).

Although less critical than Benjamin about historicism, Siegfried Kracauer, his contemporary and friend, shows a more explicit indexical trust on photography when he proposes a historiographical model that would allow to think things from their very place instead of referring them from above, while also acknowledging the constitutive meanders and digressions of essay as a genre. Kracauer established, in an unfinished book entitled "History. The Last Things Before the Last" (Kracauer, 2000), an analogy between photography and history by comparing them to art and literature. Trying to set a relation between realism and constructivism -which he conceived as the development of some of the theories he proposed in his "Theory of Cinema" (1960)- he recognized a "formative inclination" in history and photography that would retell the choices every historian (and every photographer) makes while editing his work, as well as with the "explanation" built around it. For Kracauer, the power of history and photography resided, nonetheless, in what he labelled the "realist inclination", of a wider scope than the formative inclination, unlike the case of literature and art. This tendency to realism is related to the intensity and the limitation shared by history and the photographic image, in their ability to "register and penetrate the physical reality" (Kracauer, 2010, p. 97) [2]. This precise circumstance would concede a material (and redemptive) relation between those ways of knowledge and the everyday world; a relation that, in the case of philosophy, had only achieved certain dignity in the frame of Husserl's phenomenology.

It is no coincidence that Carlo Ginzburg, one of the main figures of the indexical paradigm (Ginzburg, 1999, pp. 138-175), would go back to Kracauer's work, in order to evidence the elements shared by his own concept of ''microhistory'' and the second's theory of history. To Ginzburg, microhistory shows an unquestionable analogy with the use of close-up in cinema, since it allows to capture certain details of life unnoticed by macrohistorical narratives. This goes as far as to turn this kind of gaze into an analytical tool that would support different viewpoints in approaching macrohistorical events [3]. According to Ginzburg, the defence of truth, as brought up by the images of history and photography, must be read in the context of the polemic that confronted the Italian author to the thesis of the American historian Hayden White, qualified as "fictionalists" by the former. In the context of the limits of the representation of the Holocaust, Ginzburg is highly (and one must also say unfairly) clear when he censures the skeptic inclinations he believes White's position implies [4]. To Ginzburg, the fact that historiographical discourse can share features with literature and cinema, as White defends (he has highlighted the tropological, metaphorical and figurative elements of the historical narratives), does not imply they can be taken as homologous [5]. The content of truth of the former would be guaranteed by the indexical quality of the

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material with which the historian works, whose discipline would have occupied in Kracauer's thought an epistemological space midway between science and art –a similar place to that often assigned to photography.

Four extreme photographs, not conceived in relation to historiographical discourse but questioning the role images play in it, were Didi-Huberman's main concern in his book Images malgré tout. When he thinks about the four photographs taken by members of Auschwitz-Birkenau's Sonderkommando with the aim of registering the reality of gas chambers and crematoriums in concentration camps, the French historian attacks both the postmodern inclination to reject the "indexiability" of images by denying all bonds between truth and photography, and those historians who, acting as lazy wisemen when it comes to confront such images, do not perceive the phenomenological imprint on their registering, to turn them into an illustrative document of the narrated events, thus being careless with the singularity of the images as "visual events" (Didi-Huberman, 2004) [6].

II) Uncertainty.

In the 1992 movie *Le tombeau d'Alexandre*, translated to Spanish as *The Last Bolshevik*, Chris Marker compiled, intervened, and edited an awesome amount of archive material, as well as testimonies and images registered by the film maker himself, with the aim of recomposing the life of the Russian eccentric producer Alexander Medvedkin through the succession of a series of cinematographic letters aimed to him. For the sake of precision, what Marker was in fact building was a complex and edgy image of the history of cinema, of thew history of the USSR and, finally, one could say, a history of this "short XXth Century", as British historian Eric Hobsbawm would say. Although Marker's work, midway between documentary and film essay, is closer to that of an heterodoxal historian than to that of the common film maker, by seeing his film one could believe that Medvedkin, deceased in 1989, was, in fact, Marker's creation. More than creating hypotheses on this fact's cause, we are interested in stating, *à propos* Marker's film, that we cannot deny that, what the French philosopher Jacques Rancière calls "the work of fiction" (as it happens, in his opinion, in political action). Despite the documentary character -or lack of it- of the images, the work of fiction acts on reality, opening it, undermining it, and aesthetically redefining it [7]. But what happens when fiction comes to take the place of reality -as Marker points after the photograph of the recreation of the assault of the winter palace, filmed in 1920 by Nicolai Evreinov, which recognised French publishers print in its cover as a "document" of the actual historic event? How does this alter our indexical trust in the photographic medium? Isn't this trust, granted a priori to photographic images, the same one that enables deception to take place? By revealing the documental fake of the image, its very own fictionality by means of another fiction, Marker does not try to be redundant, by any means, either in the typical skeptic relativism of postmodernism or in the paralyzing suspicion on the truth value of images that belong to the past. Well aware of the power of these images, his aim is to remark the bonds between reality, document and fiction as part of a complex cinematographic exercise in which historical truth, rather than focusing in a trustworthy representation of the past, is nothing but the product of a dialectic image, framed in the coordinates determined by the present.

Hito Steyerl has established a comparison between *The Last Bolshevik* and a former film by the same French producer (*Le train en marche*, 1971), in which some interviews with Medvedkin also serve as starting point. In Steyerl's opinion, although both films address the relation among documentary and production, a radical difference could be established in the way they both treat that link. If the first film could be labelled as productivist, since it would respond to the *factum verum* principle, where the mere act of doing would appear as the holder of meaning, the second film could be

characterized as 'factographic', in the sense that it would be closer to the *verum factum* assertion, namely, the truth is something which is produced [8]. Even if this would not imply relativizing the validity of this truth, we would have moved from the idea of production as truth to that of truth as production [9]. However, in *Le tombeau d'Alexandre*, the effect generated by editing the selected archive documents (where productivist movies of the 1930s play an important role) is final, and is surprisingly described by Steyerl as an "excess" that surpasses the elaborated feature of documentary truth.

"The evidence born from Marker's interpretation of the archival material seems to belong to another dimension. More than to constitute an intentionally produced result, it is as if it would be appearing by surprise. It exceeds the meaning supposed to images, their function as an education and control device. Its truth, far from being produced, emerges from the rupture with its original context or situation. This rupture temporally suspends its bonds with power and knowledge. It strikes us since its meanings contradict themselves and can not be solved by means of just one interpretation. It presents an unresolved complication. While context can be produced, as can its elements be, the element that surprises us comes from the rupture with whatever is produced, not from production itself."

This excess would paradoxically free the image from its own factographic intentionality (*verum factum*), in order to present it as true fact (*factum verum*) that would require from the spectator a certain will to understand it (or, to be more accurate, a will to produce a critical and political comprehension of the fact). Although there are some differences in the ways they both work with images, Marker places himself close to Godard, inside the crew of contemporary film-makers for whom the use of montage intensifies images –and does not detach them from any reality (Didi-Huberman, 2004, pp. 201 ff.) [10]. Truth emerges from its use as affective power that, far from despising its indexicality (or, what is basically the same, its historicity), assumes its own fragmentary nature, as well as the incertitude we feel about the imprints of the past, in order to place them in a particular essay of heterogeneous times and voices conflictingly rescuing its own singularity. In a postmedia era such as ours, which Steyerl, in a recent article, has described as of "documental incertitude", an exercise such as Marker's turns out to be inspiring in confering archive images a certain strength that would inevitably bring them to rethink the problems of their time. Its historical intensity should be resolved in a kind of montage politics that would demand from us, against all skepticism, to confront ourselves with both what we see and what stares at us.

Footnotes

[1] From my position as a historian, this essay is nothing but an approach, midway between the phrasing of the problem, its pondering in a loud voice, and the declaration of intuitions, to questions which presumably could only be answered with greater certainty through the completion of a long-range process of research and reflection. Ultimately, it is all about thinking how the images of history can have the intuition of their stable truth within the abyss of times, so as to affect the present in terms of echoes from a future-charged past. The text establishes an involuntary and humble dialogue with Aura Fernández Polanco's "Pensar con imágenes: historia y memoria en los tiempos de la googlelización" ("To Think with Images: History and Memory in the Times of Googlization"), published in 2010 as part of the book "Arte y política: Argentina, Brasil, Chile y España. 1989-2005" ("Art and Politics: Argentina, Brasil, Chile and Spain. 1989-2005"). Involuntary, since I had no access to that article while I was writing mine; an article whose reading, made possible by having its author e-mail it to me, has unveiled the way in which we both ask ourselves similar questions, which have arisen from shared readings (with Sigfried Krakauer's presence occupying a central place in them). Humble, since, no

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doubt, the scope of the issues Aurora Fernández Polanco brings to the table would merit a wider treatment than the one made here. Her words regarding the current bonds between experience and representation, image and occurence, history and memory, have left a sediment and a resentness that, due to space and time limitations, would need to be displayed at other time. I appreciate the help of Aurora's feedback in the finishing of this text.

[2] As Kracauer himself stated, the parallelism between history and photography goes back to his 1927 article on the second (Kracauer, 2008, pp. 19-38). However, according to Carlo Ginzburg, while in this very first article photography was depicted as the "sign of fear of death", in "Theory of Cinema" and in "History. The Last Things Before the Last", Kracauer understood, from his reading of Proust's "Guermantes' World" -where the French writer described the vision of his dying grandmother a camera had given him- that photography, in its impassivity, lets us distance ourselves from the reality it captures, thus confronting us with a kind of truth that allows us to "look death in the eye" (Ginzburg, 2010, p. 333).

[3] In this respect, Ginzburg acknowledges his de http://tiruleta.es/es/content/category/2-vendenos-tu-ropabt to Benjamin's concept of 'optical unconscious', elaborated in texts such as his "Short History of Photography" (Benjamin, 2007, pp. 21-53)

[4] The positions of both authors with regard to this subject, which discussion would benefit from a dedicated treatment, can be found in the lectures they gave in the conference "Nazism and Final Solution: In the Boundaries of Representation", held in April 26-29, at the University of California. White's text was entitled "The Historical Framework and the Problem of Truth". In his defence of a historical writing that could mirror contemporary events, White advocated for a recovery of Barthes' "medium voice", in relation to modernist "intransitive writing", which would overcome the classical division between objectivism and subjectivism (Friedlander, 2007, pp. 69-91). Ginzburg's, "Just a Witness", confronted the subjectivism and objectivism he attributed to White by vindicating the surviving witnesses' voices (Friedlander, 2007, pp. 133-156).

[5] To this respect, Ginzburg's criticism of White's position can be related to Barthes' position. The last, despite being known as one of the main readers of photography in indexical terms, denied this condition to the historical discourse (Barthes, 1988). Concerning Barthes' case, Michel de Certau's position should be remembered, in particular his denial of Barthesian defence of the "historical genre's univocity through time" (de Certau, 1999, p. 57). I am thankful to Yayo Aznar for pointing these issues out.

[6] This operation would have been physically concreted by the cutting of the images taken by the members of Sonderkommando, from which the darkest area, that showed the risky situation at which they were taken, would have been erased. A fair example of this is the image chosen to illustrate the cover of the Spanish edition of the book. Moreover, we should mention the fact that Didi-Huberman rescues Ginzburg's criticisms of White's position (which Didi-Huberman extends to Jean-François Lyotard) in order to root his position in the polemic maintained with Gérard Wajcman, Élizabeth Pagnoux and Claude Lanzman (Didi-Huberman, 2004, pp. 154-155). In an interview with Pedro G. Romero, the French historian questions Ginzburg's homologation of the characters that would engage the work with imprints with a policeman's attitude (Sherlock Holmes and Giovanni Morelli), to others that, conversely, would do it with the attitude of a politician (Aby Warburg and Sigmund Freud). These last ones would transcend the strict attributionist or accusative definition of imprints in order to interpret them in the scope of a model related to the knowing of dreams and images. http://www.circulobellasartes.com/ag_ediciones-minerva-LeerMinervaCompleto.php?art=141&pag=3#leer,

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retrieved 31 October, 2011.

[7] For Rancière's analysis on Marker's work, with a special emphasis on the editing procedures chosen by the producer, see Rancière, 2005, pp. 181-196)

[8] For a wider and more specific historical study of the meaning of the term 'factography' in the USSR avant-garde context, cfr. del Río, 2010.

[9] http://eipcp.net/transversal/0910/steyerl/es, retrieved 31 October, 2011

[10] With regards to Godard's work, Didi-Huberman has also pointed out the possibility that images could acquire an excessive nature, in ambivalence with the default sensation they could cause us if perceived in an isolated way. "I believe Godard has always placed his reflection on the limits and powers of cinema in between the systole and diastole of the image itself: its essentially defective nature, alternating it with its ability of suddenly becoming excessive". (Didi-Huberman, 2004, p. 199).

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