

Towards a History through Photography: An Introduction

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“To serve as history, facts must be intelligible, must be given an order and a meaning which does not crush their autonomy as facts. The historian’s task resembles the photographer’s: how to make the random, fragmentary, and accidental details of everyday existence meaningful without loss of the details themselves, without sacrifice of concrete particulars on the altar of abstraction.”¹

1. The lettered order of history

It is no secret that images hold a special place in historiography. We speak of a complicit though complicated relationship between images and history, a relationship that has long been vital because images have always provided important insights into history and were accepted as equal to other written source materials. This is certainly true for those historians who work on antiquity or the early modern period, and the medievalists. Yet, with the chemical-technological invention of photography in the 1830s this relationship seems to have experienced serious frictions. Photography has caused an epistemic divide, as suddenly it promised to render historical events ‘truthfully’ visible, in the way it produced ‘raw’ documents of history and secretly started to compete with historiography, since it gave rise to a new visibility that the written document was unable to

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redeem. Suddenly, photography bore witness to some elements of history, such as the gesture, a facial expression, an attitude or tension, that otherwise would not have been recorded. The historian Pierre Nora reminds us when examining the relationship between history and photography that the “image, and particularly photography as a snapshot wrested away from the flux of constant movement, as a distinctive sample of a lost reality, corresponds to what our relationship with the past has become: a relationship of discontinuity governed by a mixture of detachment and approximation, radical distance and disconcerting confrontation.”²² As a principle feature, it is this innermost experience of discontinuity that binds together the undertakings of history and photography.

Despite the fact that a number of debates, such as the German *Historismus* or the French *Nouvelle Histoire*, enabled photography to be theoretically accepted and advanced it as a model, the use of photographs in historical studies remains rare. The *Nouvelle Histoire* in particular claimed a programmatic diversification of source materials that would include the photograph as document. That photography was socially accepted in historiography, the art historian Clément Chéroux suggests, was due to circumstances, as the perception of photography as a reliable medium went hand in hand with a shift in the conception of history itself. He further underpins, regarding the recurrent attempts to methodologically relate photography with history, the capability of the photograph as a medium to reflect *about* history, rather than being a medium of history. This may be a powerful discovery in itself as it implies conceiving of the photographic image as a historical reflection that could spark a history *through* photography. Yet, the non-convergence of photography and history stubbornly persists, and has been framed as the “invisibility of the visible.”²³ While the history *of* photography is certainly flourishing today, history *through* photography seems to be still poorly explored.

So one of the questions that guides our reading of the photographs in this Special Issue, besides their different historical contexts and uses, is: Can we write history through images?²⁴ Building on the first attempts to study photography in Latin America and to question the photographic image as a valid source in Latin American history,²⁵ we seek to expand towards a reading of the image as a historical reflection. This means that we seek to examine the meanings of the photographs within their specific historical context, and we do so via an accommodation of the perspective of the visual that challenges the predominant lettered order of historiography. By taking the photograph as a historical reflection we seek to inquire into the discrete epistemic and methodological status of the image in history.

Interestingly, the question of the image as a reliable and truthful source material, through which knowledge may be attained, took place long before the

photograph became an object of history itself. For instance, in the tradition of Occidental knowledge and culture its status as a source material was profoundly questioned. With regard to the image's status therein, the historian Tomás Pérez Vejo notes that Occidental culture has been profoundly shaped by a logocentrism, in which knowledge is primarily fixed through the words of written texts.⁶ Moreover, this logocentrism, he argues, still prevents the Occidental intellectual elites of today from fully recognizing the popular culture of the masses, which is fundamentally iconic.⁷ Although our relationship with images has become more and more an object of study, this inquiry seems to be even more complicated when it comes to examining photographs. This might be because we still “[...] may be hampered by the indexical and iconic aspects of photography, by the fact that photographs tend to be read as mimetic representations of what is rather than as wishful constructions of what might be.”⁸ Photographs are still primarily associated with a chemical-technical procedure that promises ‘truthful’ visibility. Interestingly, in the early days, photography was often perceived as a procedure that seemed to indifferently reproduce greatly varying subjects and transfer them to a single material layer. Notably, classified originally as a mechanical reproductive process photography was initially excluded from the positivist discourse of the arts, having been classified as an inferior material. It was believed that “photography shared a certain adaptability with synthetic materials, from cast iron to rubber to plastic, and like them it initially had to overcome the stigma of being a surrogate.”⁹ Yet, over time, the more and more widespread use of photography helped establish it as a source for historical studies provoking more theoretical and methodological inquiry into its status. Illuminatingly, it was Siegfried Kracauer, one of the first cultural critics, who articulated the inner connections between photography and history by understanding the image as a historical reflection whose meanings we may be able to grasp only through interpretation. He thus explored the “tension between facts and meanings, between visual details in themselves and the significance discovered through them.”¹⁰ This “tension between facts and meanings” certainly best describes the center of the actual battle about the photograph as an historical document that is equal to and as valid as the written ones and relates no less than to the very discussion of reliability of source materials in historiography. That is to say that doubt about the photograph as a reliable source in history persists, because images are predominantly associated with “subjective visualities” subordinated to a still “objective and thus authoritative way of seeing the world. The stubborn persistence of this notion concerning photography well into the twentieth century would not have been uncharacteristic of attitudes toward modernization in Latin America and indeed in much of the world,” as Jorge Coronado underscores with regard to Andean photography.¹¹

So, once again, Kracauer's reminder becomes pertinent: "photographs are still 'bound to record nature in the raw. Like the natural objects themselves, they will therefore be surrounded by a fringe of indistinct multiple meanings.'"¹² Following these paradoxes of photography, it is clear that as a simple reflection of reality the photograph will certainly not tell us about reality. Yet, taking it as something "constructed," in the way Kracauer once suggested, the photograph might be an extraordinarily revealing document.¹³

But what have been the obstacles to photographs being fully included into the arts of historiography? One reason might be, as Pérez Vejo suggests, that the construction of images of the past as works of art had a devastating effect on their use as historical documents.¹⁴ To include images and thus the visual as constitutive parts in the study of history has profound methodological implications that the papers in this Special Issue implicitly contour. That is, following the understanding of an alternative epistemology that gives emphasis to a more intuitive reasoning, in accordance with Carlo Ginzburg's acclaimed intervention, the image is to be considered of the same rank as any written document. This undertaking subsequently leads to a series of more fundamental questions concerning the status of image.¹⁵ Though most historians tend to be inclined to emphasize the photograph's depiction and thus the idea of evidence, the image certainly is also always a construction and a mirror of reality, making it an opaque fact.¹⁶ So we may diagnose a still valid hierarchy of the status of documents that defines the image as a secondary and thus less reliable source. As for the arts of historiography, the image did certainly not shake its predominant lettered order, despite the fact that the *pictorial turn* had its garish resonances much earlier in the human sciences, defining a productive shift in the conceptualization of a variety of cultural forms that fundamentally questions what a picture is.¹⁷

Let me thus turn again to the idea of photography as a medium for generating evidence related explicitly to the broader discussion of modernity, the photographed subjects, and the image's authority, as it is questioned by the papers of this Special Issue. More generally, with regard to historical evidence the discussion on how photographic images work when they deal with violence and even genocide is rather wide-ranging. For instance, photography has been conceived as an efficient instrument to conceal or even entirely erase the atrocities committed by the State through a "'civilized' visuality," as outlined by the cultural critic Jens Andermann as a history of violence in relation to the nation-building of Argentina in the 19th century.¹⁸ He demonstrates how the visual efficiently makes violence and genocide invisible through "disappearing acts." Significantly, in contrast to modern State power and control and to the more common view of historical studies about the elites' hegemonic discourses, in recent debates on Latin American history the conception of the image as agency has sparked new

research on photography and photographic practices in Latin America looking at their local epistemologies. Based on the Guatemalan Zanotti photograph collection of portraits the historian Greg Grandin provocatively reverses the postcolonial claims to a “radical autonomy of difference” made by Gayatri Spivak or Dipesh Chakrabarty and their construction of subaltern subjects, asking “Can the subaltern be seen?” Notably, emergent historical studies precipitate the need to look at the entanglements of modern imaginaries and the agencies of subaltern subjects and indigenous peoples in their own right.¹⁹ This perspective is taken further by Coronado more recently, when he examines photographic practices of local photographers in Cuzco against the lettered order of *indigenismo* and the national models configured in the construction of the *indio* in the context of the modern national intellectual culture of the early 20th century.²⁰ Both authors, Coronado and Grandin, propose a critical investigation of the relationship of indigenous peoples with modernity, challenging the thus far dominant narrative of their hierarchized and marginalized position within the national modern project. The viewpoint of a history *through* photography unquestionably emphasizes the various indigenous and subaltern representational strategies in their own right, empowering groups in Cuzco and the K’iche’ indigenous people in Guatemala, as Coronado and Grandin respectively demonstrated. Coronado even suggests in his study that photographs – and not only the ones he examines – “must be conceptualized differentially, in particular as a sort of competing or alternative practice to writing. They might also be understood semiologically across a broader array of visual practices, such as those of dress and performance.”²¹ Yet, the notion of agency with regard to photography remains problematic here, as the photographic practices in the Andean, as shown by Coronado, are deeply ambivalent. This ambivalence may be because “Andean photography would either witness a dissipation of subalterns into Western (read colonizing) forms of representation, [...] or provide an index of a profound alterity that nevertheless would always be displaced from photographic objects and practices themselves. In either scenario, subaltern agency becomes estranged from mediation.”²² Accordingly, one of our suggestions is that because photography provides a considerable variety of access to subaltern and popular practices, it is a privileged medium that occupies necessarily a greater socially permeable space, unlike any of the other lettered practices on which we traditionally rely for writing history.²³

2. The contributions: towards a history through photography

Significantly, for the philosopher Jacques Derrida a text, a symbol, or a sign is not just a representation of an original reality. But rather, he underscores, if texts *mean* something at all, then it is the engagement and the belonging, being a part of the same texture, of the same text, that link the existence with the writing.²⁴ So it is with images too: they become meaningful within their *hors-texte*, in the way they are read today. This becomes particularly true if we work with images to write history and thus visit archives that provoke a continuing transformation of the facts, inasmuch as images, as Trachtenberg has underscored earlier, “have a life of their own which often resists the efforts of photographers and viewers (or readers) to hold them down as fixed meanings.”²⁵

I wish to add another implication of this reading of images for what it brings to our idea of historical evidence, which is what is at stake here when using images as historical sources. I am arguing that the examination of photographs is not related to the search for the image as fact, but rather to its capacity for testimony, used in historiography as a metaphorical concept. Conversely, the concept of testimony in images reveals that the image cannot be simply evidence, since images require a critical examination to unlock their meaning. That is because testimony is situated beyond historicization and the logic of evidence, for the gesture of witnessing is fundamentally different to that of evidencing.²⁶ Following this, testimony is thought of as a practice that involves a social and cultural situatedness that is constitutive of a social epistemology.²⁷ Consequently, testimony becomes possible through a receptive experience of readership, in which the images’ meanings are necessarily embedded. It is certainly this epistemic status of the images that makes our use of them as historical sources challenging. Moreover, I argue that this complex constitution of images that is linked to the social and cultural act of testimony requires us to conceive of photography as a model of historical reflection that disputes the written archive. That is because images necessarily rely on interpretation, on our engaged and complicit relationship with them. Accordingly, images potentially articulate something that has not been articulated yet, namely a symptom of becoming, an expression of something displaced. Thus it becomes clear that memory and remembrance are not at all stable processes and that archives, into which most historical images are embedded, articulate this unstable limit between the private and the public while negotiating the displaced. What the art historian Georges Didi-Huberman provocatively suggests elsewhere thus also becomes important here: “What we should learn, [...] is to manage the mechanism of images so as to know what to do with our sight and with our memory.”²⁸ Because images as material sources may arouse a broader participation of readership in their

interpretation – besides the fact that both the visual and the oral are still being related to the popular classes and rather treated as unreliable sources for writing history –, they certainly provoke a revisiting of the lettered order of history while reinforcing democratization.

So the authors of this Special Issue relate to some of these challenging questions provoked by the critical relationship between photography and history. The historian Sven Schuster thus inquires about “Envisioning a ‘Whitened’ Brazil” by examining the relationship between photography and slavery at the World’s Fairs between 1862 and 1889 looking at the Brazilian elite’s self-promotion of an idealized image of the “modern nation.” He relates through the image as a representational means to the colonial psychic and material space of slavery. So he argues that the photographs purposefully conceal the violence of slavery, as they were used to economically promote the country that was depicted as European in order to spark the gradual process of “whitening” through immigration. Using the image as a tool in the Brazilians’ modern project, photography potentially reinstates the critical memory of slavery, in which the former slaves have become nevertheless historical agents. In his study, Kevin Coleman raises the question of the right not to be looked at and thus relates to the idea of agency in a different way revising one of the fundamental relationships between the photograph, the photographed, and the photographer. He revisits the 1953 published *Life* magazine that had sent its world-renowned photojournalist Margaret Bourke-White into the mountains of Mesoamerica, “where her drive to take pictures collided with a poor man’s desire not to be photographed.” Dialoguing with the “civil contract of photography,” which Ariella Azoulay has theorized thoroughly, Coleman reflects on the right to resist to be photographed and gives the idea of citizenry of photography a deeper understanding expanding it towards the right to privacy and invisibility.²⁹ So he reflects obliquely on that unstable limit between the private and the public that photographs – taken or not – necessarily contest. He thus expands on the claim of the citizenry of photography that “is not governed by a sovereign or limited by territoriality” and that “includes anyone who addresses others through images or who takes the position of a photo’s addressee.” Ezer Vierba in his account discusses the relationship between images and authority and offers us a pointed analysis of the “Political Trials Captured in Cuba and Panamá, 1955-1959” contrasting both experiences. He calls attention to the different ways in which images mediate the public life of judicial processes and the censorships the Cuban Batista and Panamanian Remón regimes had exercised on the images. While in Panama “alongside a discourse that focused on evermore detailed examination of documents and testimony, images in the press showed the drama of the court itself,” he argues, in Cuba photographs of mass graves and tortured bodies were shown “alongside laconic descriptions of

the revolutionary tribunals' work, but the images of the old regime's crimes were most often not connected to any specific discussion in court." So he trenchantly asks: Are photographs inherently democratic or repressive?

Overall, what all these contributions certainly share, besides their different thematic focus and approaches, is the understanding that images and visualizations unfold their complex and autonomous existence and that they are not utter transparent media or windows to the past. So the papers contour the images' own narrativity allowing them their often "stubborn silence" and "their status as document or trace, their formal and material virtues."³⁰ They all suggest that we must learn to be prudent enough about how we use particularly photographs in the historical sciences, for we need to inquire critically about how to read the opaqueness of the images' tension between facts and meanings and, further, the images as material sources in their relationship with all other written materials. Notably, the historian of science Michael Hagner and the art historian Peter Geimer precisely coincide in this when they remind us that:

"There is no reason to object to the examination of images with regard to the conditions of their genesis and their purpose in order to allow conclusions to be drawn about a specific historical constellation. Yet, it would be reductionist to do this from the viewpoint of a confirmation of or addition to written sources – as if images and texts would always follow the same trajectory. Rather, it is about considering the forms of contemplation and imagination that appraise images not only with regard to their bare value of information (but also) include their aesthetic, affective or through empathy mediated understanding. How do we handle the paradoxical temporality of visual fragments that as 'surviving images' (Didi-Huberman) simultaneously belong to the past and the present?"³¹

Finally, the papers somehow adopt the image as a historical reflection: in the way they represent "the past, photographs serve the present's need to understand itself and measure its future. Their history lies finally in the political visions they may help us realize."³² That said, this Special Issue aims to discuss Latin American history through photography by emphasizing the photograph as an historical source and questioning the relationship between history and photography. Intrigued by the image's tension between facts and meanings, at the center of this Special Issue's interest is the visual in historiography following the question of how the writing of history might change if we engage more profoundly with photography. One implication of this undertaking might certainly be to revise the lettered order of history. So all papers – some more explicitly, others only implicitly – come across the very question concerning the epistemic status of photography in history. By the same token, the visual, they argue, becomes pivotal when it comes to discussing Latin America and its historical processes, memory, and political conscience that are mirrored in the existing contested and open

contemporary situations there. This Special Issue thus wishes to make explicit the perspective of the visual in the arts of historiography by adopting the image as the lieu for a historical reflection. It furthermore aims to raise awareness of the critical relationship between photography and the history of Latin America and wishes to stimulate a broader scholarship of a history *through* photography.

Notes

- 1 Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History: Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), p. xiv.
- 2 Pierre Nora cit. Ilse About and Clément Chéroux, *Fotografie und Geschichte* (Leipzig: Institut für Buchkunst, 2004), p. 10 (my translation).
- 3 Ilse About and Clément Chéroux, *Fotografie und Geschichte* (Leipzig: Institut für Buchkunst, 2004), p. 97 (my translation).
- 4 See here also Tomás Pérez Vejo, “¿Se puede escribir historia a partir de imágenes? El historiador y las fuentes icónicas”, *Memoria y sociedad*, 16: 32 (2012), pp. 17-30.
- 5 I refer here in particular to the early interventions by Robert Levine that stimulated a broader discussion about the relationship between photography and history in Latin America: Robert Levine, *Images of History: Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Latin American Photographs as Documents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989). Robert Levine, “Windows on Latin America: Understanding Society through Photographs,” Special Issue *South Eastern Latin Americanist* (June-Sept. 1987).
- 6 Pérez Vejo, “¿Se puede escribir historia a partir de imágenes? El historiador y las fuentes icónicas,” p. 20.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 57.
- 9 Monika Walter, “Material,” in Karlheinz Barck (ed.), *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2001), p. 883 (my translation).
- 10 Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, p. xiv. See also Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things before the Last* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).
- 11 Jorge Coronado, “Toward Agency: Photography and Everyday Subjects in Cuzco, 1900-1940,” *Latin American Perspectives*, 36: 3 (2009), p. 124.
- 12 Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, p. xvi.
- 13 Nora cit. About and Chéroux, *Fotografie und Geschichte*, p. 42 (my translation).
- 14 Pérez Vejo, “¿Se puede escribir historia a partir de imágenes?,” p. 20.
- 15 Ibid., p. 22.
- 16 Ibid., p. 27. See also Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).
- 17 See here W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995).
- 18 Jens Andermann, *The Optic of the State: Visuality and Power in Argentina and Brazil* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007).
- 19 See here for instance Christopher Pinney and Nicholas Peterson, *Photography's Other Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Greg Grandin, “Can the Subaltern

- Be Seen? Photography and the Effects of Nationalism,” *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 84: 1 (2004), pp. 83-111.
- 20 Coronado, “Toward Agency,” pp. 119-135.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 125.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 129.
- 23 See also Jorge Coronado’s argument on the diverse use of Andean photography in different social classes as an indicator for “photography’s ubiquity and its attendant presence in spaces and with social actors with which lettered *indigenismo* often did not come into contact.” Coronado, “Toward Agency,” p. 128.
- 24 Jacques Derrida, *Grammatologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983), p. 258.
- 25 Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, p. xv.
- 26 Heike Schlie, “Bemerkungen zur juristischen, epistemologischen und medialen Wertigkeit des Zeugnisses,” in Schlie and Wolfram Drews (eds.), *Zeugnis und Zeugenschaft. Perspektiven aus der Vormoderne* (Munich, Wilhelm Fink, 2011), p. 26.
- 27 See here Oliver Scholz, “Das Zeugnis anderer – Sozialer Akt und Erkenntnisquelle,” in Sibylle Schmidt, Sibylle Krämer and Ramon Voges (eds.), *Politik der Zeugenschaft. Zur Kritik einer Wissenspraxis* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2011), pp. 23-45.
- 28 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008), p. 252.
- 29 See here Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008).
- 30 Peter Geimer and Michael Hagner, “Vergangenheit im Bild. Einleitende Bemerkungen,” in Geimer and Michael Hagner (eds.), *Nachleben und Rekonstruktion. Vergangenheit im Bild* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2011), p. 11 (my translation).
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 11 (my translation).
- 32 Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, p. xvii.