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Sparks of reality: on the temporalities of the photographic image

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Abstract. Within the context of the contemporary heterogeneity of photographic practices, the present text describes some of the possibilities of understanding the temporality of photographs, giving an account of some important theoretical references (Benjamin, Kracauer, Barthes, Derrida). Bearing this in mind, describing photographs as sparks of reality is a way of expanding the Benjaminian proposal and avoiding the strict logics of causality. The strength of photography unfolds the technologically rooted paradox of photographs, whose contemporary relevance can be analysed in the intersection between aesthetics, history and politics. The film *48*, by the Portuguese filmmaker Susana Sousa Dias, explores this intersection by using and showing the cracks of the political prisoners' mug shots.

Keywords. Photography, time, paradox, spark, history.

1. HETEROGENEITY AND PARADOXES

Since its invention, technological developments and the manifold uses of photography have been transforming our understanding of aesthetic phenomena, producing changes in our perception, new concepts and new ways of understanding our relationship with images. From the «purely» photographic practices to the intermedia ones, the scope of photographic work is nowadays almost incommensurable, both inside and outside art institutions. This process has become richer and more complex since the 1970's, when photography finally started to play an important role in the art world. Furthermore, the constant use of vernacular photography by contemporary artists, their meticulous development of conceptual programmes or their reappraisal of archival images – just to name a few of our current photographic experiences –, widened the aesthetic boundaries of photography. Probably due to this heterogeneity and diversity, it is difficult to find a common ground for discussing contemporary photography – a scenario that contrasts with the seem-

ingly more plausible discussion about the aesthetics and philosophy of cinema in the last decades.

Recent overviews of the main trends in photography from the point of view of contemporary art confirm its heterogeneity (Cotton [2004]). On the other hand, Michael Fried, with his *Why photography matters as art as never before*, gave a thorough and valuable contribute to understanding the contemporary relevance of photography. Taking into consideration works from different epochs (though focusing mainly on contemporaneity), Fried interprets them not only according to its imaginative and poetic strength, but also to its philosophical and ontological relevance. Several of his book's chapters deal with concepts that Fried had introduced in previous works, such as objectuality or theatricality. This means that (and he recognizes it) the premises of his interpretation stem from a predetermined set of questions from his art theory, namely from his analysis of painting or minimalist art. Nevertheless, among other achievements, he emphasizes the unfolding of the specific capacity of photography to tackle the objectuality of objects or the everyday experience of the world, and how this has become relevant to contemporary art (Fried [2008]).

Given this context of heterogeneity, how is it possible to develop an aesthetically relevant understanding of photographic time?

First of all, and from a general perspective, we can say that photographic practices can performatively stage – and feed the philosophical thinking of – the paradoxes of representation (without rejecting representation as an outmoded term, like many modernist trends promptly did). And they do this because they often work in-between straight documentation, imaginative poetics and conceptual art, constantly negotiating with contingency and chance, as well as with the different temporalities which spring from the technical process of immobilization.

An overview of such different temporalities and their interstices was at the core of the proposal for «Photoespaña 2010», devoted precisely to the question of time. The curator Sérgio Mah rightly points out that the recent technological

possibilities offered to photography, namely the multiplication of postproduction practices, seem to conduct less to an obsession with the truth of representation than to an approach to the cinematic, the theatrical, the pictorial or the literary, understood as forms of expression that explore the value of indeterminacy, the attraction for reflexivity and the possibilities opened by an image which conveys an experience of time as immersion. (Mah [2010]: 18) Moreover, postproduction creates a space for all sort of playful mechanisms and contamination of forms: «Just like the cinematic and the pictorial have always constituted structuring categories of the photographic culture, so the photographic comes out of photography and inserts itself in painting, in photography and video, contaminating them» (*Idem*). I would like to highlight this tension between medium specificity and contamination which is at the core of photographic temporality, particularly in contemporaneity. Like a tiny spark, each photograph conceals this tension, which is also a potentiality.

Except in the case of false photographs (for example, when an image is entirely produced by computer and therefore cannot be said to be a photograph), every single photograph is the result of the contact between a photosensitive surface and the light emitted or reflected by an object, a person or a state of things in the world. The moment of contact, which is actualised in the present-time of each image, is already part of the past. From a phenomenological perspective, this ambiguity can be thought as a temporal variation of presence / absence, which is the core of all images. So, through its power of interruption, one of the fundamental characteristics of photography is the manifestation of a paradoxical and even disturbing temporality, which reinforces our relation to the past and disrupts the linearity of chronology. This dialectical characteristic of photography involves a temporal paradox and seems to demand paradoxical thinking too.

Photography not only overthrows the usual categories of time. As Roland Barthes suggests, it also produces a new category of space-time: «an illogical conjunction between the *here-now* and

the *there-then*» (Barthes [1964]: 44). To what Barthes says, we can add that this formula adequately describes only half of the photographic paradox, namely the space-time of the snapshot. The space-time of the time exposure would in turn be described as another illogical conjunction: *now* and *there* (Duve [1978]: 117).

Thierry de Duve was prompt to identify these paradoxical features and to assert that they have simultaneously a destructive and constructive side, in the sense that these new and illogical conjunctions work outside the usual categories of time.

2. TINY SPARKS

It is well-known that, for Walter Benjamin, photography comprises elements which resist purely artistic and aestheticizing intentions. The main question guiding Benjamin's essays on photography is: «What does photography do to art?» This question is answered in two ways: the first concerns the reproducibility of works of art; the second and more subtle one concerns the specific ways by which the techniques, the practices and the concepts of photography contaminated the art world, disseminating new aesthetic values. «Benjamin had directly criticized both the emergence and the discursive history of the question of whether “photography is art”. He views it as a trap and instead shifted it to the much more productive question of how, in light of photography, the concept of art has changed and must be changed» (Weigel [2006]: 239-240).

Examining a photograph of Dauthendey, he writes:

Immerse yourself in such a picture long enough and you will realize to what extent opposites touch, here too: the most precise technology can give its products a magical value, such as a painted picture can never again have for us. No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark (Funken) of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared (durchgesengt) the character of image

(Bildcharakter), to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it (Benjamin [1931]: 510)¹.

This sentence is both a characterization of the photographic medium, in comparison to painting, and a display of its paradoxes. Its magical value is related to the «tiny spark of contingency» that, having seared the image character, allows the beholder to experience a temporal movement between past, present and future. The existence of this tiny spark doesn't depend on the photographer's art, and the traditional concepts used to define art, specially painting, are of little use to understand its strength. The «here and now», the contiguity between image and reality which expands in time, short-circuits any direct and simple logic of causality between image and referent, and exceeds any semiotic theory or commonplace understanding of indexicality. Instead of causality, notions like contamination, combustion, irradiation or dissemination seem to grasp more accurately the logic of the singular spark.

More than a definitive theory of photography, Benjamin presents a method of addressing the tensions concealed in photographic time: either in the subjective sense, i.e. remembrance – the aura of old portraits and the cult of remembrance (Benjamin [1955]: 257-258) – or in the historical sense, i.e. the fact that the historical tensions of the present can only be understood when read against the backdrop of the past. The second occurrence of the word «spark» (*Funken*) in *Little History of Photography* – in its diminutive form (*Fünkchen*) – shows how the questions posed at the end of the essay are capable of discharging the historical tensions of the age of the daguerreotype. It is through the present (now-time) that the past (what-has-been) discharges its historical tensions, but it is also through «the illumination of these sparks that the first photographs emerge, beautiful and unapproachable, from the darkness of our grandfathers' day» (Benjamin [1931]: 527). Again,

¹ Translation modified.

doing justice to the historical index of images through the gesture of looking back always conceals the possibility of illuminating the present and, in a certain sense, foreseeing the future.

This is not a dismissal of the now, of the present, but a possible method, open to detours², to working with photographic temporality.

3. NOTIONS OF TIME IN PHOTOGRAPHY

The language we use to describe photographic experiences is impregnated with notions, metaphors and analogies related to its temporal dimension. Daido Moryama's sharpness is helpful here: «If you were to ask me to define a photograph in a few words, I would say it is a “fossil of light and time”» (Moriyama [2007]: 211). The simple technical recording of a particular moment through the action of light has an immediate – though sometimes virtual – effect on our mnemonic experiences, both individual and collective. The fossil is, so to speak, a capsule of time capable of enacting different practices, forms of imagination and concepts. But perhaps the expression «photographic time» is more ambiguous than it seems at first sight. So, let's do an exercise and delve into some of the commonplace understandings of photographic time in the least erratic way possible.

Notions like *instant*, *cut* or *immobility*, related to the photographic technical procedure and the way it acts on the temporal and spatial continuum; notions like *decisive moment* (in Cartier-Bresson's sense) or *in-between moments* (like in so many of Robert Frank's or Nan Goldin's photographs, just to name two examples), related to a specific appropriation of our relation to the world and daily life – they all point to different temporal dimensions.

Photography has also a profound relation to *traces* and *vestiges*. In a certain sense, every photograph is a trace, and the subjects in a photo-

graph are traces of the subjects which stood before the photosensitive surface. Some photographers seem to explore and intensify this idea by following subjects which are themselves traces. This is quite obvious, for instance, in the work of Sophie Ristelhueber on the effects of time in landscape, in body scars or conflict zones. They are not merely documents, but a performative documentation of the passage of time and human history, revealing that photography can capture not only decisive moments, but also vestiges, what comes after... In works such as Ristelhueber's, the concept of trace is doubly operative: traces and vestiges of the world and bodies are recorded in an image which is itself a trace and vestige of something that necessarily belongs to the past.

The same can be said about the experience of time in *series* or in *montages*, where the temporality of a single image is combined with other singularities, thus opening a multitude of aesthetic possibilities, where the *interval* between the singularities is of utmost importance. This interplay between the singular, the whole and the interval creates a special relation between the beholder and the temporality of the images.

If we emphasize the idea of instant and understand photographs as strictly related to a specific moment, it may seem difficult to acknowledge any kind of *duration*. To contradict this idea, let us first dive into the paradox of photographs: freezing a moment in the temporal continuum, they allow this moment to *survive* and *endure*. A second aspect, closer to the photographic technique and its visual effects, is related to the effect of *motion blur*, which conveys the idea of spatial movement inside the photograph, and therefore a certain temporal continuity – the time between two points; on the other hand, photographers working with *long-time exposures*, like Michael Wesely (see, for instance, his work on Potsdamer Platz, with an exposure time of up to 26 months), explore the visual and imaginative potentialities of duration. Wesely's long-time exposures often form a complex layered picture containing the imprint of different temporal moments.

One last aspect implies the difficult task of

² «Method is detour» is the well-known motto from the *Trauerspiel* book where Benjamin describes the philosophical method of presentation (*Darstellung*) (Benjamin [1928]: 28).

thinking duration independently of any spatial movement, at the core of immobility, something that brings into play the present image and its virtuality, our memory and our body. To reflect upon this, it would be necessary to confront Bergson's philosophy of time and Deleuze's books on cinema, mainly his concept of *image-time*. Damian Sutton's recent proposal goes in this direction, exploring the durative unfolding occurring within the punctual image, and in this sense exploring the abovementioned paradox: the not anymore and the not yet of the time exposure. «Far from exhausting signification, the time of the image unfolds to enwrap the instant, splintering interpretation over and over. Deleuze's philosophy gives us a name for this: the *crystal image* of time» (Sutton [2009]: 63).

So, photographic images are necessarily linked with the time and space from which they come, but they survive and persist, they are open to the dialectic between the *now-time* and the *what-has-been* – the notions with which Benjamin describes the historical category of «dialectical images». And this persistency not only concerns exercises of individual remembrance or the functions of documentation and archiving, but it is also a condition for the processes of detour in the reconfiguration of the atlas (as in Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*) or even in the playful and performative purposes of Lebanon's recent troubled history (as in Walid Raad's *Atlas Group*).

4. AFFECTION AND AFFECTIVITY

«This-has-been». With this expression that entered the photographic jargon, Roland Barthes grasps the interplay between time and reality, somehow resonating Walter Benjamin's texts on photography. It is an expression that entails a series of consequences related to photographic evidence and to the diversity of issues Barthes explores in *Camera Lucida* (1980). However, the temporal dimension as a nuclear point of photography had already been the subject of a seminal essay by Kracauer in 1927, where he reads,

not only the history and the developments of the photographic productions of his time, but also the way photography was taking part in a profound transformation of our experience of memory and history, generally speaking.

In *Photography*, Kracauer refers to an old photograph of a grandmother (he never states that she is *his* grandmother) and to the fact that her grandchildren were looking at the photograph as something that was making them simultaneously laugh and shudder. They were laughing because of the outmoded ornaments and clothes she was wearing. They were trembling because they also knew they were looking at the past, at something that would never return:

They laugh, and at the same time they shudder. For through the ornamentation of the costume from which the grandmother has disappeared, they think they glimpse a moment of time past, a time that passes without return. Although time is not part of the photograph like the smile or the chignon, the photograph itself, so it seems to them, is a representation of time. Were it the photograph alone that endowed these details with duration, they would not at all outlast mere time; rather, time would create images for itself out of them (Kracauer [1927]: 49).

The grandchildren tremble not only because of their grandmother and her ornaments, but also because of the self-presentation of time through this photograph. It is not just an affective relation between grandchildren and grandmother. The temporal dimension doesn't appear due to the affection involved in beholding past objects, but through these same objects. Later on his text, Kracauer will describe the temporal experience of photography (he makes an analogy with playing an old hit song or reading old letters) in terms of an unredeemed ghostly reality capable of conjuring a disintegrated unity (Kracauer [1927]: 56). These subtle observations, which he leaves hanging in the air and doesn't fully develop, are important to understand photography in its relation with temporality and affection, both in its emotional sense and also in the sense of a predisposition to be affected by time.

The example of Kracauer's grandmother is representative of the importance the familial, domestic and private dimensions have in photography. In fact, one of the major personal uses of photography is related to the necessity one has to support memory and to keep one's loved ones close. Kracauer's text does not explicitly develop this idea, but the affective relation with photography is certainly part of Barthes's concerns in *Camera Lucida*. In fact, in the first chapters of this book, he states that: «As *Spectator* I was interested in Photography only for "sentimental" reasons; I wanted to explore it not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think» (Barthes [1980]: 21).

The experience of time in photography does not depend on affections, but affections can be said to intensify the way we experience the effects of time. Barthes' experience of the photographs of his mother, and especially the winter garden one, provides a model for this kind of intensification. The attention Barthes pays to sentimental issues is simultaneously the strength and the weakness of his text, a characteristic which led many of its critics to consider it nothing but a text on love, mourning or suffering. Affection allows one to redeem the «this-has-been» from a certain indifference, though indifference is one the most common experiences favoured by photographs in our daily life.

But, besides affection, in its emotional and sentimental sense, we can also talk about it as a disposition to suffer the effects of reality and time, something that photography – and cinema, with other conditions and consequences – is capable of doing in a peculiar and incisive way: to expose ourselves to photography as something which brings to the forefront the evidence of reality and time paradoxically means experiencing them in a direct but differed manner.

In an interview edited under the title *Copy, Archive, Signature: A Conversation on Photography*, Jacques Derrida talks about the necessity of rethinking self-affection, while simultaneously active and passive, from the point of view of time (Derrida [2010]: 11-12). Photographs, already in

the time of exposure, are not pure *passivity*. Even if the photographic mechanism seems to dismiss human agency, there is a whole set of intervention, choices and intentions which account for active movement. Nonetheless, the *activity* related to these interventions does not efface passivity, because it is a consequence of the contiguity between the photographic image and the real. Thus, the paradox between past and present comprises the paradox between passivity and activity. This has to do with a philosophical problematic which finds its first formulation in Kant. Later on in the interview, Derrida returns to this complex question:

But the Kantian-Heideggerian (also no doubt Husserlian) analysis to which I referred a moment ago concerns temporality as a pure auto-affective synthesis in which activity itself is passivity. This problematic is indispensable, even if it may be unfamiliar in the milieus in which a competent discourse on photography is practiced. The meditations are numerous; certainly, they are difficult and nuanced, but the link with the specificity of photography is perhaps best indicated, although indirectly, in the fact that this meditation on auto-affection as temporality passes through the schematism of the transcendental imagination. It is a question of the image, of the production of the fantastic, of an imagination that is productive in the very constitution of time and in ordinary temporality (Derrida [2010]: 14).

It is not my intention to develop the proposal Derrida sketches in his interview, but it certainly prepares the ground for a fertile discussion on temporality and the necessity of rethinking photography with concepts capable of grasping its complexity and its paradoxes. The paradox of the auto-affective synthesis of time encompasses the production of photographs, but also the experience of the *Spectator* who, as it were, re-enacts it in his or her own way. Finally, it also explains how certain photographs interfere with our human temporal constitution, reminding us of our existential vulnerability.

5. SPECTRES: FROM THE INDIVIDUAL (SUBJECTIVE) EXPERIENCE TO THE HISTORICAL ONE

While distinguishing three different aspects (or three emotions, or three intentions) of the photographic experience, the *Operator*, the *Spectator* and the *Spectrum*, Barthes writes:

The Operator is the Photographer. The Spectator is ourselves, all of us who glance through collections of photographs in magazines and newspapers, in books, albums, archives... And the person or thing photographed is the target, the referent, a kind of little simulacrum, any eidolon emitted by the object, which I would like to call the Spectrum of the Photograph, because this word retains in its root a relation to «spectacle» and adds that terrible thing present in every photograph: the return of the dead (Barthes [1980]: 9)³.

Reading this section of *Camera Lucida* through the logic of the ghostly appearances, Jacques Derrida stresses the conceptual irreducibility of the *punctum* (different from the *studium*), locating it in an intermediate space between life and death. «Ghosts: the concept of the other and the same, the *punctum* in the *studium*, the completely other living in myself. This concept of photography photographs every conceptual opposition, finding in it a relationship of haunting which perhaps constitutes a “logic” in itself» (Derrida [1981]: 274). The idea that photography photographs concepts is a necessary consequence and a symptom of a reflection that assumes the contact with reality which is intrinsic to photographs. This contact exerts pressure on the related conceptual thinking by means of contamination. For Derrida, who closely read Barthes, these are metonymic effects, exactly because they encompass an untamable contiguity between the *punctum* and the order of concepts. And the intensity of the *punctum* is also the intensity of time, of the «that-has-been» (Barthes [1980]: 96).

The spectrality of photography is already present in the nineteenth century discourses on pho-

tography. Balzac, who lived for about eleven years after the invention of photography, experienced both the fascination and the magical effects of the technique, as well as its individual and social consequences. Furthermore, he believed that physical bodies were constituted by layers and spectral images. According to Nadar, Balzac was obsessed with the idea that each time a body was submitted to a daguerreotype «capture», one of these layers, one of these images, would be peeled off (Nadar [1900]: 1-8). Walter Benjamin goes a bit further and interprets the Balzacian theory according to Democritus theory of the images (*eidola*), a theory later adopted by Epicurus: human perception doesn't take place by means of a visual image in the retina, but through an effluvium, a sort of image emanated by physical bodies which is constantly crossing space. Thus, one of Balzac's quotations from *Cousin Pons*, which Benjamin gathered in *Das Passagen-Werk*, lays at the centre of an analogy of bodies and ideas: the daguerreotype is capable of capturing the spectres of bodies, just like certain creatures with rare capacities are capable of apprehending the forms and traces of ideas that live in a spectral way in the atmosphere of the spiritual world:

Just as physical objects in fact project themselves onto the atmosphere, so that it retains this spectre which the daguerreotype can fix and capture, in the same way ideas [...] imprint themselves on what we must call the atmosphere of the spiritual world [...] and live on in it spectrally (one must coin words in order to express unnamed phenomena). If that be granted, certain creatures endowed with rare faculties are perfectly capable of discerning these forms or these traces of ideas (Benjamin [1982]: 688).

Though seemingly anachronistic in the age of digital technologies, this interstitial status of the photo seems to describe a «space» whose limits are somehow undefined, and where rational and irrational forces can become operative, because they communicate with the deepest human psychology and creativity. On the other hand, this understanding of photography and of the apprehension of ideas is a gateway to the historical

³ Translation modified.

conception supporting the unfinished project on the Parisian arcades (through the discovery of the forms and traces which involve a non-causal treatment of historical phenomena). Besides, it proposes one of the various possible affinities between photography, history and thinking. The spectre is thus not just a ghost, but an imagistic space capable of linking the past and the present and therefore of leading to historical, social and political tasks.

Benjamin characterizes his position on history and historiography against prevailing ones, and does so by affirming a movement of interruption that suspends the continuum of time. By retaining the traces of past and future – a past and future it nonetheless transforms – the photograph sustains the presence of movement, the pulses whose rhythm marks the afterlife of what has been understood, within the movement it gorgonizes. Only when the Medusan glance of either the historical materialist or the camera has momentarily transfixed history can history as history appear in its disappearance. Within this condensation of past and present, time is no longer to be understood as continuous and linear, but rather as spatial, an imagistic space that Benjamin calls a «constellation» or a «monad» (Cadava [1997]: 60).

Cadava rightly emphasizes the existing links between Benjamin's figurative conception of history and photography. In this sense, photography does not give us an image of time, but it is in itself a model of a dialectical conception of historical time, apart from historicism – whose conceptions both Benjamin and Kracauer tried to overwrite. The figurative spatiality of photography and its immanent principle of interruption can thus be understood as a critique to positivism and to the ideal of progress. The fixed image, a basic element of any photograph, is a mark of the singular virtually facing the historical and the transindividual.

Another dimension of the tiny spark, or better said, another of its virtual consequences, is to be read in an entry of *Das Passagen-Werk*:

The entrance of the temporal factor into the panoramas is brought about through the succession of times

of day (with well-known lighting tricks). In this way, the panorama transcends painting and anticipates photography. Owing to its technological formation, the photograph, in contrast to the painting, can and must be correlated with a well-defined and continuous segment of time (exposure time). In this chronological specifiability, the political significance of the photograph is already contained in nuce (Benjamin [1982]: 690-691).

According to this entry, the invention of photography brings forth something unprecedented. Despite the fact that Western culture found in photography, as André Bazin puts it, a fulfilment of an ancient wish of fixing time in a faithful and realistic image, there is something in the photographic event that is absolutely revolutionary. The moment of contact in the time exposure, as a technological basic element, immediately opens a field of disruptive political forces, of potentialities, which is also a room for play / for manoeuvre. In this space where construction and destruction intersect, the photographic strength opens the possibility of imagining and re-enacting history in a differed way.

6. 48

In her third feature 48 (2009), filmmaker Susana Sousa Dias tackled once again the Portuguese dictatorship, which lasted exactly forty-eight years (1926-1974). The device used in the film is subtle but complex, combining static mug shots of political prisoners during the dictatorship with their present voice and testimonies. So, the film operates through the juxtaposition of visual and discursive elements, exploring the tension between the fixed visual past and its differed actualization with the present voices. The aesthetic mechanism through which the invisible transforms the visible – and vice-versa – is also a way of bringing to light certain traits of the Portuguese dictatorship, such as the torture of and the violence towards political opponents, which also occurred in the colonies at the time.

Often displayed for several minutes, the photos are nonetheless subject to micro-movements

resulting from the techniques of displacement, overlapping and enlargement. Therefore, the work of montage and postproduction, the role of silences and subtle sounds during the interviews are fundamental and contribute to creating an intense and compelling experience. In some cases, the same person is displayed in different periods (different detentions); in other cases, the marks of fatigue and of the invisible tortures become visible – and are reinforced by the testimonies; in the majority of the cases, the details in the photos are a starting point and sometimes also a returning point, sparking some kind of remembrance, filling in the memory gaps or serving as a visual counterpart to the oral testimony.

The slow pace of the film gives the spectator enough time to immerse both in the prisoners' countenances and to suffer the effects of their gaze. Duration and other heterogeneous forms of time play a complex role in this process: the conflicting temporalities between the time the photos were taken, the time of the interviews several years later and the time of the *Spectator*. We are never shown the current faces of the interviewed persons and this prevents the images of the past from becoming a mere illustration of their present ones. This temporal gap creates a constant tension, and the archival photographs are forced to crack, hence showing something that was not intended at the time of their production.

Decontextualization is a well-known avant-garde device, at least since Dadaism and Duchamp's ready-mades, and the archives have been fuelling several photographic artistic works in the last decades. Larry Sultan's and Mike Mandel's 1977 book *Evidence* is a seminal work that illustrates this, since it completely transforms the epistemological and evidential function of its photographs, which were carefully and enigmatically selected from dozens of US archives. But *48* operates in a different way... Susana Sousa Dias is not just undermining the dimension of evidence (proof) of the mug shots. Her action is much more complex, and not only because it deals with cinematographic mechanisms. After all, photos which belonged to a specific regime of visibility, with a strong political back-

ground, are thus aesthetically transformed, acquiring new and profound political, historical and existential tasks. They are taken out of their original institutional place, attaining to legibility according to the now-time (Benjamin [1982]: 463), but this is achieved because the logic of irradiation and the temporal tension of these portraits is maintained. Therefore, the historical period of the dictatorship in Portugal is transfigured by this action.

What are phenomena rescued from? Not only, and not in the main, from the discredit and neglect into which they have fallen, but from the catastrophe represented very often by a certain strain in their dissemination, their "enshrinement as heritage". They are saved through the exhibition of the fissure within them. There is a tradition that is catastrophe (Benjamin [1982]: 473).

Saving and redeeming a phenomenon can also be achieved by displaying its own cracks. This is particularly true for the film *48* and its montage, which is also a form of displacement. The combusive character of these photographs combined with the testimonies sparked the tension between the now-time and the what-has-been, contaminating the cinematic field and widening the scope of its documental possibilities.

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