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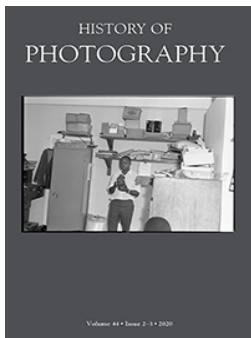
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## The Instant and Its Shadow: A Story of Photography

Jean-Christophe Bailly. Trans. Samuel E. Martin. Fordham University Press, New York, 2020. xvi + 128 pages, with 13 black & white illustrations. Softcover \$25.00, ISBN 978-0-823-28744-4.

**Filippo Pietrogrande**

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**The Instant and Its Shadow: A Story of Photography**

Jean-Christophe Bailly. Trans. Samuel E. Martin. Fordham University Press, New York, 2020. xvi + 128 pages, with 13 black & white illustrations. Softcover \$25.00, ISBN 978-0-823-28744-4.

With a literary artifice already employed in some of his previous works, Jean-Christophe Bailly begins *The Instant and Its Shadow: A Story of Photography* with a presentation of the circumstances that opened the space of the book. First, the ‘looming’ up of an isolated image in the form of a postcard: the tenth plate of William Henry Fox Talbot’s *The Pencil of Nature* (1844), entitled *The Haystack*. Originally a calotype, to be precise, the image depicts an imposing pile of hay in the peaceful English countryside against which leans a light-coloured ladder, casting a clear shadow. Then, the unconscious slippage towards another familiar photograph: the image usually labelled *Hiroshima*, taken in 1945 by an anonymous photographer in the aftermath of the explosion of the atomic bomb. The photograph shows a ghostly white ladder placed on a wall and, behind it, its burnt shadow alongside that of a man, both imprinted on the wood planks by the blinding flash of the bomb. Finally, a third image, often confused with the latter, capturing the same scene: this one labelled *Nagasaki*, showing just the absolute shadows on the wall. The referent of the shadow has disappeared and what remains, like an echo without source, is just the ‘memory’ of the ladder on the panelled wall, together with the dark silhouette of the man.

A ‘whimsical’ association of two or three photographs, then, which – one might think – could easily inspire a systematic reflection on the ontological status of photographs and an exploration of the dramaturgy of the aporetic presence/absence couple that underpins them. But the book originating from this montage follows, in truth, no specific theoretical intention – although, it must be stressed, this means neither that it gives no space whatsoever to theoretical analyses nor that it lacks in theoretical rigour. Even its structure, as systematic as it may seem at a first glance – two parts, each seemingly dedicated to one of the two scenes – is not reflected in the actual content, which gives much more space to free reflections around Talbot’s haystack, leaving the Japanese shadows to the last twenty pages. Overall, the driving force of the book seems more literary than scientific; some sort of ‘*pensée flottante*’ (wandering thought) directs and gives meaning to these pages.

Bailly embarks on an intellectual journey from the bucolic scene of the English countryside to the catastrophic scene of the Japanese ruins, driven by the desire to identify and give consistency to the haunting link between the two views. This journey is effectively intended as a story of photography, as the subtitle of the English translation indicates: a story of the path leading from one image to the other, a story of this spontaneous superimposition. In this narration, however, for the author something of the essence of photographic capture is clearly at stake. In more specific terms, Bailly defines the scope of his quest as the attempt to summon the ‘latent image’ that survives between these photographs and travels from one to the other, thereby sealing their unexpected montage. This effort rests on the assumption – inherited from Aby Warburg – that behind the stillness of every image there is a hidden field of agitation waiting to be revealed. Every fixed image, argues Bailly, is in the position to be put in movement by a conscious or unconscious stimulation of its latent connectability. From this assumption, he claims one could even extrapolate a theorem: ‘the more singular the image, the greater its connective power’. What, then, in the initial image had the power to summon the other? First and foremost, a slanting ladder, no doubt, and the shadow of that ladder. In other words, a purely formal bridge: an isolated detail, an accent, first forms the junction. But according to Bailly, once this association is created, the transitional object loses its centrality as it is ‘overwhelmed straightaway by a kind of hermeneutical tempest’.

One could say that, throughout the pages of the book, Bailly does nothing more than navigate through this tempest. Starting from the invention of the photographic art, he dedicates particular attention to Talbot’s insistence on the natural quality of photography and to his empirical observations devoid of any positivistic preconceptions with regards to the relation between these new images and reality. In reference to the twenty-four calotypes constituting *The Pencil of Nature* – the first published book illustrated with photographs – Talbot speaks of sun pictures, impressions of light made by nature’s hand on sensitive paper. Hence the volume’s title, which could be almost read as a subjective genitive: the pencil of nature means nature holding the pencil and doing the drawing of itself. For Talbot – rightly notes Bailly – photography essentially belongs to a magical or phantasmagorical regime, in which the role of human activity is relegated to that of placing in the hands of nature the allegorical implement of the pencil, as if to do away with itself. The images obtained by the action of light through the camera lens on a paper screen are then conceived more as natural productions than artificial reproductions. For the photography pioneer, it is less a matter of an imitation of reality than it is of a natural projection, as in the case of a shadow or a reflection.

Far from any form of mimetic realism, Talbot is actually fascinated by the possibility offered by the new invention to give consistency to the most ephemeral things. In a crucial passage for Bailly’s analysis, Talbot writes: ‘The most transitory of things, a shadow, the

proverbial emblem of all that is fleeting and momentary, may be fettered by the spells of our “*natural magic*”, and may be fixed for ever in the position which it seemed only destined for a single instant to occupy’ (original emphasis). Driven by the desire for holding onto the instant of a shadow appearing, Talbot unconsciously links the birth of photography to the foundational myth of Western figurative representation narrated by Pliny the Elder in *Naturalis Historia*: a young woman of Corinth outlining her beloved’s shadow projected on the wall by the light of a lamp, in the attempt to alleviate the pain caused by his imminent departure – a ‘foundational myth’ of photography also explored, for example, by Victor Burgin (‘Shadows, Time, and Family Pictures’ in *Situational Aesthetics*, 1996) and Geoffrey Batchen (*Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*, 1998).

Bailly lingers extensively over this brief but significant quote throughout the book, extracting an ontological principle from it. The shadow, being less a spatial projection than a temporal appearance – ‘the proverbial emblem of all that is fleeting’, as Talbot wrote – becomes a cipher for the photographic art. What appears on the sensitive paper, in fact, is not the re-presentation of reality but, more precisely, a detached shadow of instantaneous appearance: ‘A photograph, which can seize a shadow, is itself like the shadow of the instant it seizes’, writes Bailly. Photographia, ‘drawing with light’, would then be, more appropriately, skiagraphia, ‘drawing with shadow’. A fleeting instant is crystallised forever in an image by the photographic process. But what this image indicates is not so much immobility as the fugitive nature of the real. The paradox of photography testifies to an absent real. The destiny of this art is that of registering the immediately vanishing projection of an instant.

It is then just a short step from the spring sun of the English countryside to the lethal sun of the Japanese cities, despite the century that actually divides them. The catastrophic nature of the photographic art – salvaging an instant while at the same time pointing at its inevitable disappearance – is embodied in the upsetting phenomena accompanying the nuclear bomb’s detonation. It is reality itself that becomes a sort of photographic event by means of a radioactive flash that imprints the shadows of its subjects on the sensitive skin of the world, in the very moment in which it erases them once and for all. Certainly – one could argue against Bailly – with respect to Talbot’s natural vision of photography, the photographic effect of the nuclear explosion seems to depend on a different agent: it is humans who, even if unknowingly, produce a sort of photogenic drawing; it is humans who, in a way, retrieve the pencil that Talbot had left in the prodigious hands of nature. The metaphoric link here stretches almost to the breaking point. Nonetheless, the power of Bailly’s montage of images remains untouched, and the magical quality of photography is retained also in the Japanese views, even if in the eerier form of an atrocious cancellation: did not, in fact, Balzac notoriously fear – as Bailly reminds us in the concluding pages – photography’s capability of stripping away the outermost layer of a person? Does not the flash of the atomic explosion – this is Bailly’s question – provide a kind of radical foundation of this dread, akin to the ones often reportedly expressed by ‘primitive’ peoples?

In the end, the montage of ladders and shadows suggests that photography ‘always has death in sight’. Like a memento mori, in the images captured by Talbot at the joyful dawn of photography speaks a premonitory oracle. Photography, one could say with Bailly – and with Roland Barthes before him – is nothing but a relic of the real.

Filippo Pietrogrande

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### Archaeology and Photography: Time, Objectivity and Archive

Lesley McFadyen and Dan Hicks (eds). Bloomsbury, London, New York, 2020. 264 pages, with 70 black & white illustrations. Hardcover £90.00, ISBN 978-1-350-02968-2.

From François Arago’s report on the work of Louis Daguerre and Nicéphore Niépce to Victor Burgin’s *Voyage to Italy* (2006), the interrelationship of archaeology and photography has been discussed and visualised in numerous forums over the past two centuries. For Arago, the extent to which photography might render a ‘valuable service to archaeology and the fine arts’ was a key consideration in determining the significance of Daguerre’s invention. As Susan Sontag would later recognise, archaeologists were quick to appreciate the value of the camera as a tool of inventory – a way of documenting and (visually) preserving material remnants of the past in the present. In more recent theoretical work, this functional association has been fused with an ontological sense of archaeology and photography as somehow analogous. In this reading, both photography and archaeology are seen to prioritise the ‘trace’ as a way of apprehending time and history. As Burgin puts it in *Voyage*