

UNIVERSITY OF DERBY

IMAGING THE CITY: MODERNITY,
CAPITALISM AND THE MAKING OF
MODERN ATHENS

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Abstract

All throughout the 19th century, the city of Athens manifest a distinct character that was inspired by its history. Flourishing with Neoclassical civic architecture, it remained a modest metropolis that was planned to function harmoniously around its ancient monuments. Today in the 21st century, its landscape has undergone a radical transformation. The city has expanded uncontrollably to accommodate an ever-increasing inflow of urban migration, accumulating one half of the nation's entire population within a confined geological space. Athens has become a product of cataclysmic urban growth. Furthermore, the ancient city is becoming increasingly anonymous, sprawling, with a landscape that is subjected to dominant economic trends.

My photographic work for this practice led Ph.D. critically examines the ways in which development has made an impact on the Athenian landscape, altering its physiognomy. My research draws together Eugène Atget's documentation of the city of Paris, in conjunction to Walter Benjamin's criticism of modernity to demonstrate how capitalism produced a destructive effect on culture and a loss of history to society at large. In addition, I investigate the documentary value of the work by contemporary photographer Andreas Gursky to establish the character of our own modern age, and to create a critical image of the city and its landscape in the photographs of my work. Throughout my research, I consider how Atget, Benjamin as well as

Gursky utilise the aesthetic of the photographic document as a model for generating a criticism of society, new ways of perceiving the world, in addition to generating a sense of historical awareness for the observer of their work.

Through particular subjects such as the industry of property development, tourism, as well as others, I explore how Athens has lost the inherent connection with its history and the cultural heritage that it is simultaneously trying to promote. Juxtaposing Athens with Old Paris, I consider how the historic parts of the city become destroyed in the interest of urban development, and argue that the present chaotic appearance of city is not only the product of its modern history, but also the outcome of capitalism as a world historic condition of our time.

Introduction

Inhabited continuously for the past three thousand years, the ancient city of Athens has had a long and turbulent history. In recent times during the early 19th century, after having been completely destroyed by war, Athens was subsequently reconstructed to manifest a distinct character. Inspired by its history, a modest city was built in a manner that would advocate its ancient heritage and reflect the ideals of its glorious past. Athens flourished with Neoclassical civic architecture and a new town plan. It became a small and thriving modern metropolis, which was planned to function harmoniously around its ancient monuments. Its architecture was in keeping with the ancient Greek principles that were associated with restraint, symmetry and proportion, and its urban environment was generally comprised of wide streets, gardens and plenty of open space.

In the 20th century Athens would be subjected to destruction once again, seeing that its landscape has undergone a radical transformation. The city has expanded uncontrollably to accommodate an ever-increasing inflow of urban migration. Today it is overcrowded and polluted. It has become a bustling modern metropolis that is home to approximately five million inhabitants, accumulating one half of the nation's entire population within a confined geological space. Athens has become a product of cataclysmic urban growth, which continues to this day. In what ways has development altered the city's character? The chaotic appearance of Athens clearly

suggests that it has lost the inherent connection with its history and the cultural heritage that it that it is simultaneously trying to promote.

My photographic work for this practice led Ph.D. encompasses two parallel lines of inquiry: the first is to critically examine the appearance of Athens in the 21st century together with the ways in which development has made an impact on its landscape, and the second is to produce a body of images documenting the Athenian landscape, which illustrates the social and economic condition of our time. In order to document the city, I have looked to the photographic practice of Eugène Atget in conjunction with the cultural criticism of Walter Benjamin, in addition to the work of contemporary photographer Andreas Gursky to create a critical image of the city and its landscape in the photographs of my work.

What is the most distinctive feature about Athens? The city is an endless palimpsest of old and new forms, each marking a distinct layer of time in its multifarious history. However the rising national interest in development and commerce is accentuating these differences, where the old city and a new city appear increasingly at odds. Bolder forms of modern architecture are continuously being erected amongst neglected vernacular buildings that have seen better days, at the moment that timeless ancient ruins appear scattered and displaced. How is capitalism altering the physiognomy of the Athenian landscape? I would like to argue that as a result of capitalism, the ancient city in the 21st century is becoming increasingly anonymous, sprawling, with a landscape that is subjected to dominant economic trends. Moreover, can the prevailing loss of heritage that is now evident in the city be considered a general symptom of our time?

My research explores Eugène Atget's documentation of the city of Paris with respect to the repercussions of capitalism in the previous century and compares it to the culture of our present time. The material of my research has been structured into three chapters: Part I "Atget's Paris" examines the

impact of modernity in the writings of Walter Benjamin in conjunction with the photographic practice of Eugène Atget to demonstrate how capitalism produced a destructive effect on culture and a loss of history to society at large. Subsequently, Part II, "Gursky's World" explores the documentary value in the work of contemporary photographer Andreas Gursky to define the appearance of our own modern age, followed by Part III, "Modern Athens", which comprises an investigation into the development of the Athenian landscape and the introduction to my own imaging of the city. Throughout my research, I consider how Atget, Benjamin as well as Gursky utilise the aesthetic of the photographic document as a model for generating a criticism of society, new ways of perceiving the world, in addition to generating a meaningful sense of historical awareness for the observer of their work. In other words, I am generally concerned with how the medium can stimulate a broader understanding for making sense of the world, which gives a more social function to photography as a contemporary art.

Part I, "Atget's Paris" introduces Eugène Atget's photographs and the manner in which he approached the subjects for his imaging of the city, while examining in depth, the social context behind the production of his work. After all, the modernisation of the French capital has been considered the most ambitious urban transformation in history. Once a conglomeration of small towns, all throughout the 19th century Paris would gentrify entire districts in order to function as a large, unified modern metropolis. Up until the early 20th century, historic neighbourhoods were gradually destroyed in order to facilitate not only the flow of traffic with the construction of the grand boulevards, but also the expansion of commerce and consumption as well as a different way of life.

Benjamin's study of Modernity in Paris, together with Atget's exhaustive documentation of the city contributes to a critical understanding of the implications of capitalism on society. The material that I draw together for this chapter demonstrates at length, that for Paris in particular, Modernity

transformed culture and produced a loss of history. Atget made thousands of photographs of Old Paris at the turn of the century, in an effort to preserve the art and architecture of the historic parts of the city before it inevitably all vanished to the interests of economic development and the coming of a modern age. Atget became a historian of his time. Through his photographic documents and the albums that he sold to the archives of the state, he wished to demonstrate for future generations everything that was passing out of history, and in essence, what was ultimately being lost or sacrificed to Modernity. For Benjamin, the value of Atget's images was in respect to culture and the everyday life of society at large. It was the novel manner in which his photographs functioned to expose a wealth of quotidian details that became the subject of his interest. In addition to how they revealed indiscriminately, that within a booming market economy of a large urbanised centre, civic life was becoming radically transformed.

As a member of the younger generation avant-garde, Benjamin acquired a different historical perspective of his time. From the outset, what he saw in Atget's photographs was the impact of an unfamiliar and forgotten world. Atget's photographs were radical. They produced an experience that Benjamin would famously praise in several of his key writings for generating a beneficial estrangement between man and environment. Through Atget's imaging of the city, Benjamin saw the technology of photography. The photographic document had the power to provoke a compelling response in the viewer that extended far beyond aesthetic admiration. It could generate a profound experience with lost time, a sense of historical continuity, and most importantly, a critical image comprising a summary of progress in the world. For Benjamin, the modernisation of Paris in conjunction with the loss of history that was experienced in Atget's photographic documents signified for the culture of his time, developments that were of world-historical import, for which he wrote prolifically. To experience a loss of history was in itself an actual condition of his epoch, where in fact the French capital could comprise

a paradigm for the urbanisation of all cities in respect to capitalism and society at large.

Hence the prevailing loss of heritage that is currently evident in the landscape of Athens is not without precedent. Benjamin's writings clearly illustrate how in a modern metropolis such as Paris, the old city and a new city are bound to grow increasingly at odds. Moreover, in a time dominated by technology and industry, both Benjamin as well as Atget directly witnessed how various aspects of culture were increasingly being subjected to destruction on the one hand, while exposed to commodification on the other. They both acquired critical understanding of their time. Benjamin's view of Modernity was not separate from the impact of capitalism. His general fascination with cities in conjunction with his travels during his life in exile enabled him to observe Modernity closely and meticulously, yet at the same time vigilantly with a distanced eye. Seeing both microscopically as well as macroscopically at once, Paris was viewed as a "little universe" that existed within a greater cosmos, which was to say that the rest of the world was invariably no different, just simply more of the same.¹ Benjamin's criticism of Modernity remains starkly contemporary. He makes clear how through the consumption of commodities, society is deceptively succumbed to a promising new world that never comes. Capitalism is comprised of mythic forces, which perpetually transform the lives of people and society at large. In the name of historical progress, they pose a continuous threat to tradition as well as memory. They have the power to reduce each individual consumer into a dreaming collective that inevitably knows no history, as a matter of course. It follows from this that capitalism has a universal destructive effect on culture. For all that, in what ways therefore is life currently being transformed in the urbanised and global economy of our own modern age?

¹ See Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' in *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London, New York: Verso, 2006), 231.

Building on Benjamin's view of the impact of capitalism and his critique of the commodity, Part II "Gursky's World" explores the documentary value of the work by contemporary photographer Andreas Gursky to establish the character of our own modern age. Gursky's landscapes illustrate the ways in which capitalism in the 21st century has determined a particular way of life that is now everywhere the same, exceeding the boundaries of any designated city. His photographs map out for the viewer how powerful economic forces now control our current ways of living and working all over the world. Gursky travels internationally to make photographs about subjects such as urban growth, mass consumption, high-tech industry and international trade to produce a critical image of society. Like Atget or Benjamin before him, he has become a historian of his time. Similar to Benjamin's idea of the dreaming collective, Gursky's imaging of the socioeconomic situation of our epoch overshadows the identity of all individuals in monumental proportions in his photographs. Moreover, if a critique of the commodity was an urgent matter for the culture of Benjamin's time, for our modern age Gursky demonstrates how landscapes everywhere are being transformed to accommodate a way of life that is based on pure consumption.

Influenced by Atget's documentation of Paris and Gursky's imaging of capitalism, I approach the city from the optic of a distant observer and a historian of my time. Part III "Modern Athens", which is the final chapter of my research, looks back on the appearance of the Athenian landscape throughout the 19th and 20th century to highlight the key stages of its rapid development and functions as a foreword to my photographic work. More specifically, I examine the subject of architecture and how the unrestrained building practices behind this growing industry have disrupted the original character of the city, which continues to the present time. Juxtaposing Athens with Old Paris, I illustrate how the historic parts of the city become destroyed in the interest of urban development, and argue that the present chaotic appearance of city is not only the product of its modern history, but also the outcome of capitalism as a world historic condition of our time.

PART I: Atget's Paris

Eugène Atget's (1857-1927) photographic practice spanned thirty years, during which time he persistently devoted his efforts in preserving the art and architecture of diminishing, Old Paris until 1927. Atget embraced general themes in his work, such as urban life and popular culture. His choice of subjects, together with his perseverance demonstrate a latent form of resistance to the threatening changes of modernisation at the turn of the century. According to the German theorist Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), the restructuring of the city was dividing Paris into two separate worlds, producing a chasm between the old and the new. His writings on the subject of Modernity and his criticism of capitalism help to distinguish how in the French capital, Old Paris coexisted with a radically different modern metropolis during Atget's time, shedding light on the social context behind the making of his work. Through his engagement with Surrealism, historiography and his study of the city, Benjamin produced his own distinctive reading of Atget's photographs. It was precisely because his work was free of all pictorial conventions that were common in artistic endeavour that Atget's images produced a historically charged image of the world and a window into civic life.

All throughout this chapter I will be looking at Atget's documentary practice in relation to the impact of Modernity in Paris. I will begin by considering how Atget worked in the historic quarters of the city almost exclusively, avoiding modern subjects. I explore the imperative that he set for himself to produce objective records of the city rather than artistic photographs, and to record the appearance of urban life. In conjunction with Benjamin's writings, I look at the

ways the city was changing, and consider how Modernity prompted a critical turn towards the penetration of reality and a historical rendering of everyday modern life. Finally, I examine the attributes of the document, and the affinities between Atget's photographs and Benjamin's own work in their endeavour to document the conditions of their time.

Atget worked as a photographer in Paris by providing "documents for artists", that is, he supplied images to artists and designers who might have benefited from photography as a visual aid, and he also provided photographic documents as historical records to the libraries of governmental institutions. His clientele comprised of painters, illustrators, decorators and architects, as well as the Musee Carnavalet, the Biblioteque Historieque of the City of Paris, the Bibliothèqne Nationale, and even the London V&A.²

Photography historian Ian Jeffrey claims that Eugène Atget has "society" as his subject, and in particular, the aspect of the commonplace.³ He is perhaps one of the few known photographers to have adhered to such a comprehensive undertaking, as his life's work has come to consist of thousands images he called "documents", which were comprised of series, and various sub-series.⁴ Atget's major series embrace general themes such as "forms of trade", and "the street and everyday life", which have followed the photographer throughout his life. His subjects ranged from building facades, courtyards, and window displays, to more explicit series of domestic interiors, vehicles, fairs, prostitutes, street traders and rubbish collectors. In addition, his explorations extended to the outskirts of Paris, producing a number of series of rural landscapes as well as parks and gardens.

² Laure Beaumont-Maillet, Introduction to *Atget Paris* (California: Gingko Press, 1992), 23.

³ Ian Jeffrey, *Photography: A Concise History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1981), 130.

⁴ After the purchase of Atget's archive shortly after his death 1927, Bernice Abbott sold 1797 glass negatives along with 10,000 prints to the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1968. Laure Beaumont-Maillet, Introduction to *Atget Paris* (California: Gingko Press, 1992), 23.

Atget was not an artist in the modern sense of the word, nor is there evidence to support that he aspired to become one in his day. He did not seek recognition from spaces of artistic exhibition, but rather from clearly designated sources, that is, potential clientele. Thus his images, created and refined for purchase, which circled amongst the various archives and ateliers as such, had possessed, foremost, a utilitarian reason for being.⁵ From what could be speculated, Atget thought of himself as a worker in a skilled trade, a supplier of images, and a persevering artisan. It can therefore be assumed that Atget worked to produce the kind of images he did with complete awareness and modest proficiency, that he was not "... a naïve survivor of photography's early days of simple honesty, who had by luck and good intuitions found a subject of modern relevance."⁶

Outside of Paris, Eugéne Atget was virtually unknown as a photographer. However, towards the end of his life his work attracted the attention of the Surrealists, who published a small number of his images in 1926. It is well known that Atget had overtly disapproved of this collaboration on the grounds of misappropriation, insisting that his pictures were "just documents" he made, a fact, which alludes to the idea that Atget may have conceived of his images as being used in an inappropriate fashion. Writer Stephen Longmire critically sums up the affair with wit:

It is well known that Man Ray and his fellow Surrealists claimed to have "discovered" Atget, the old photographer who lived down the street, shortly before his death. Le pere Atget, they called him -- "father Atget," or colloquially (and more derisively), "old man Atget." Man Ray included Atget photographs in numbers 7 and 8 of the journal *La Revolution Surrealist* in 1926, but it does not seem to have occurred to him they might be interesting except as remarkable objects he, Man Ray, had found. Nor does it seem to have occurred to him that Atget might have insisted his name be kept out of the publication -- an avoidance of publicity incomprehensible to the more

⁵ Molly Nesbit, *Atget's Seven Albums* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1994), 16.

⁶ This comment refers to the general response of Atget's early commentators referenced by John Szarkowski. 'Understanding Atget,' in *The Work of Atget: Volume IV, Modern Times*, John Szarkowski and Maria Morris Hambourg (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1985), 3.

confrontational artist – because perhaps the old man understood enough about his neighbors not to want to be affiliated with their revolution. If so, the old man was out of luck.⁷

Atget's larger-than-life storefronts and window reflections had appealed to the sensibilities of the Surrealists. *La Revolution Surrealist* systematically published photographs juxtaposed with text to create strange and dreamlike contexts in order to subvert rationalism and objectivity. On the contrary, it seems apparent that Atget's allegiance to retain the original contexts of his images, that is, to conserve the meanings made at the site of their production and to defend them, inasmuch as to correspond with their integrity as records, clearly demonstrates that for Atget there was dignity to be found in making the sort of pictures he called "documents".

Just what type of images Atget was making and why they are important is a subject of considerable debate among historians and critics. Perhaps his greatest accomplishment can be seen in the fact that his photographs produced an unprecedented directness. Atget's images possessed an engaging fidelity. His photographs did not concern themselves with emotion or allegory. Their purpose was not to fulfil a quest for artistic self-expression but rather unpretentiously, to describe and inform. Atget's cityscapes were composed of scenes filled with "unconsidered details" and "the chance encounters of things".⁸ Regarding his visuality, the principles underlying such an achievement appear to have guided Atget in methodically "looking through generalities to find original particulars".⁹ Consequently, his photographs did not exhibit the weight of hidden meanings or sentiment but rather, they embodied a genuine appreciation for the appearances of the physical world. In this respect, Atget's straightforward approach and his intention for the

⁷ Stephen Longmire, 'Back to the Past: Atget Encore (photographer Eugène Atget)'. *Afterimage*, 28.6 (May 2001): 10.

⁸ Adams quoting John Szarkowski in Robert Adams, *Why People Photograph* (New York: Aperture, 1994), 124.

⁹ Ian Jeffrey, *Photography: A Concise History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1981), 140.

production of “documents” has equally produced quite a large amount of unremarkable pictures. As a further matter, Atget’s work embodied an aesthetic founded on the *transparency* of the photographic image, which was neither ingenious nor unique. The faculty to obtain an exact representation of objects was perhaps the single attribute of the medium that scholars and critics had immediately acknowledged; yet have been at odds about the prospects of its implementation, since the beginning of its invention. The transparency of the photographic image is associated with the camera’s indexical relationship to the photographed object, by which it conveys a sense of veracity or a connection to the real, more so than any other type of image. While on this account photography was justified in providing empirical knowledge for the sciences, conversely, it had fostered a threat to the vested artistic interests of painting for over half a century.

For Benjamin, it was the transparency inherent in the quality of the photograph that he distinguished when he remarked that Atget’s pictures

...work against the exotic, romantically sonorous names of the cities; they pump the aura out of reality like water from a sinking ship.¹⁰

The “aura” here refers to the atmospheric pictorial conventions so common in artistic endeavour. Atget’s photographs were not “pretty town views, bathed in midnight blue, complete with touched up moon.”¹¹ On the contrary, they allowed reality to show through. In a slightly different translation of Benjamin’s same text, the word “cities” is made singular, where the shift in translation not only makes reference to Paris, but also emphasises the common tendency to adhere to a stereotypical representation of place, where Atget’s pictures:

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, ‘A Small History of Photography’, in *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London, New York: Verso, 2006), 250.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 249. Benjamin has described Atget thus: “Atget was an actor who, disgusted with the profession, wiped off the mask and then set about removing the make-up from reality too. ...He was the first to disinfect the stifling atmosphere... he cleanses this atmosphere, indeed he dispels it altogether: he initiates the emancipation of object from aura which is the most signal achievement of the latest school of photography.” *Ibid.*, 249, 250.

... turn reality against the exotic, romantic, show-offish resonance of the city name; they suck the aura from reality like water from a sinking ship.¹²

More specifically, Benjamin meant that in Atget's Paris, the city with its long distinct history was not made "idyllic", that is, his images did not make a pretentious display of its past by giving pleasure through sentiment or nostalgia. The city was neither idealised or romanticised. With respect to his own reflective study of Paris, Atget's photographs were agreeable to Benjamin's interests, where the city was critically examined as a cultural construct and a model of 19th century modern life; an investigation relevant to making Atget's work more intelligible, and a matter to which I shall return later.¹³

Walter Benjamin distinguished Atget in his 'Short History of Photography' in 1931, where he wrote about the phenomenon of photography with a wide scope in mind. He was conversant with its impact and repercussions in the arts, sciences and society at large. In his time, Benjamin persistently advocated an alternative objective for the medium of photography: to move away from ventures based on aesthetic merit into those embodying a more purposeful, social role. The undisguised physical appearances, the neutrality so easily attainable and congruent with the features of the photographic image were appropriate, praised qualities for this objective. Later he was to

¹² Walter Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography', in Alan Trachtenberg (ed), *Classic Essays on Photography*, (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 209; original text reprinted from *Artforum* (Feb. 1977), vol. 15. Phil Patton, trans.

¹³ *The Arcades Project* began in 1927, the year of Atget's death, and according to the translators' forward by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Harvard Univ. Press, 2002), it was laboriously researched over a span of thirteen years amongst the archives of the Paris Bibliothèque Nationale. While it was theoretically possible for Benjamin to have come across Atget's work within the library's holdings, no such evidence prevails. Presumably Benjamin became familiar with the photographs of Atget under an artistic context no sooner than 1928, the year that images from the Abbot collection were first exhibited in Europe, or in 1930, when *Atget: Photographe de Paris*, the first monograph of Atget's work was published by Abbot and subsequently reviewed by Benjamin. See Molly Nesbit, *Atget's Seven Albums* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1994), 6, 7.

notoriously claim that Atget's deserted Paris streets were photographed as "scenes of a crime":

The scene of a crime, too, is deserted; it is photographed for the purpose of establishing evidence. With Atget, photographs become standard evidence for historical occurrences, and acquire a hidden political significance.¹⁴

Forensic images are distinguished by their significance to disclose information, to provoke examination and to require a sense of interpretation. They are not characterised by inducing the viewer into aesthetic admiration or reverie. For the latter is a type of contemplation that is associated with what Benjamin had termed "aura", which generated an overall alienating affect insofar that it was regarded as producing a distinct quality of unnecessary distance. Pictorial effects and the "ambience" of aura produced a dense mesh of time and space between the viewer and the subject, regardless of how close it existed in actual proximity. On the contrary, the methods of mechanical reproduction from which the technologies of photography and the cinema are at the core, were capable of relinquishing this impenetrable space. Objects were thought to bring themselves closer. Camera vision and the optics to facilitate sight were considered to open a novel way of seeing where all cultural works, from art and literature to the workings of the modern city itself, become accessible, comprehensible, and in the end, have the potential to become demystified. In Benjamin's view, the mechanical methods of reproduction were to have a transformative effect on the arts as well as

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, 'Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), 220. More specifically, Benjamin has made reference to Atget's photographs as 'scenes of crime' in both of his major essays. See also the last paragraph of: Walter Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography', in *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London, New York: Verso, 2006), 258.

society because in essence, they functioned as a “technology of miniaturization”.¹⁵

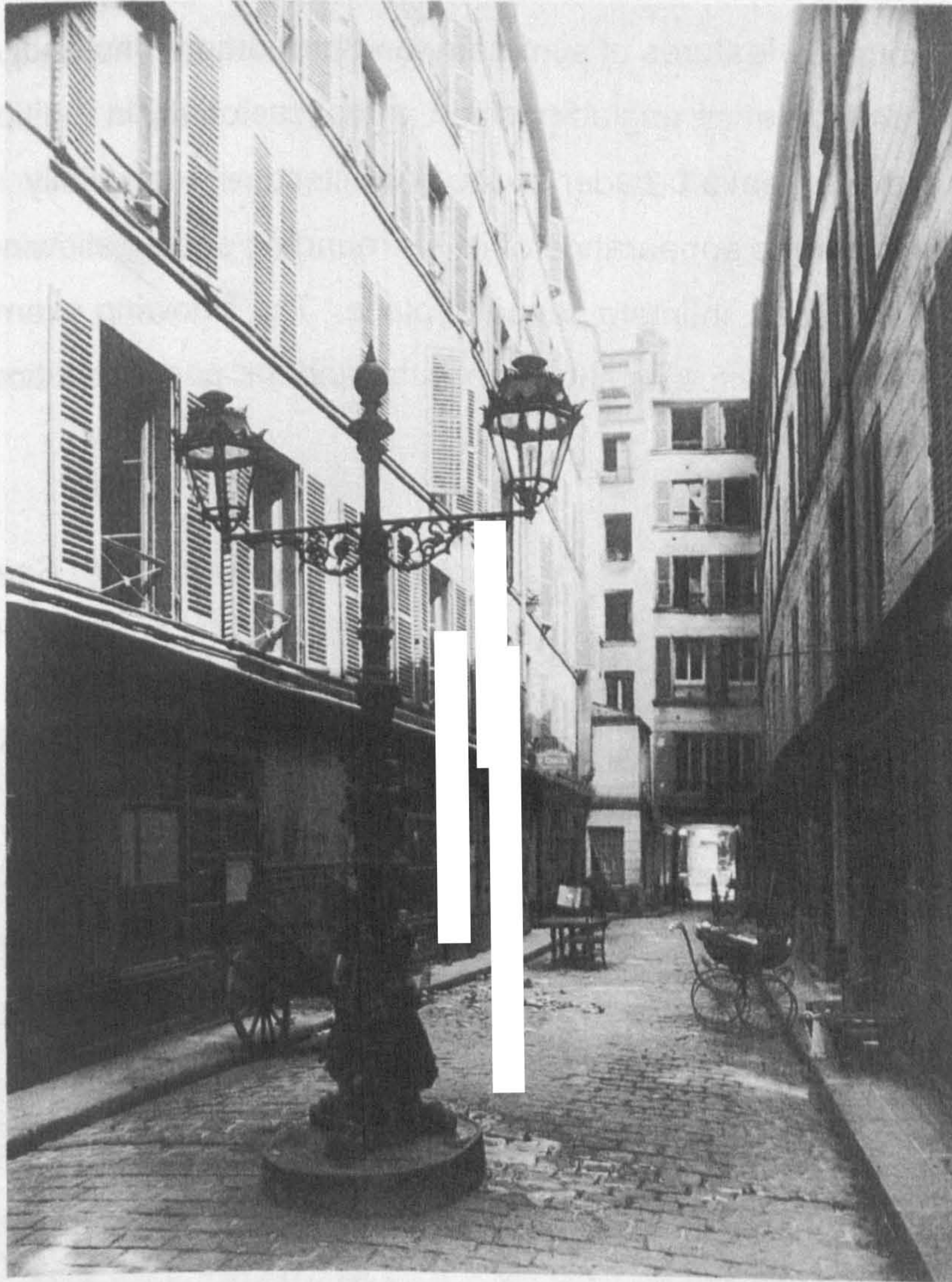
Exotic Distances

As a medium capable of bringing things closer for inspection, photographs in this light have an expanding effect on history. They increase it in scope. Atget chose to document the various aspects of the oldest part of the city that was made up of quiet, traditional corners, in a striking manner as if it had been put under a microscope. In the form of lengthy typologies, he photographed vernacular architecture as well as its distinctive decorative elements such as doorknockers or signage. Situated in the communal spaces of the city, he documented diverse structures from fountains to bollards, all considered and scrutinised with respect to the importance of their design or construction. But alongside each material subject intended for view, Atget's photographs were consistently layered to contain a discrete, parallel space for which ephemeral objects were equally allowed a rightful place.

For example, in an image titled *Cour Greneta, 163 rue Saint Denis et 32 rue Greneta (2ème), 1907*, the Greneta Court is valued for the wrought iron design of its light-post that is visible in the foreground. [See Image 1.1] The viewer is faced with a seemingly ordinary scene of a street with the subject, together with a sizeable building in the background. It is not long, however,

¹⁵ Benjamin believed that the technology of photography, with its ability to cut through impressionistic appearances and strip the subject bare of aura brought it closer to us for inspection. “Every day the need to possess the object in close-up in the form of a picture, or rather a copy becomes more imperative,” he wrote in 1931. *Ibid.*, 250. In his ‘Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ essay of 1936 he writes: “By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action.” See Walter Benjamin, ‘Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), 229.

before the attention of the viewer is aroused by the objects positioned on each side of the cobblestone cul-de-sac: a parked cart rests on the left, further down a table and chair is oddly situated in the street. Yet it is just opposite between the two on the right, where the bizarre manifestation of a baby carriage silently sits length-wise and in full view, that the viewer's attention is



1.1 *Eugene Atget, Cour Greneta, 163 rue Saint Denis et 32 rue Greneta (2ème), 1907.*

truly arrested. The deserted scene in relation to the carriage, viewed not only with respect to its connotations as an emotive subject, but also according to the peculiarity of its appearance: the bulkiness of its shape or the spokes of its wheels for which the contemporary viewer now seems dated, adds a new

dimension to the image and radically transforms it. A simple source image of a street-lamp is made to include an expansive social space from which it is enclosed.

Atget's approach to architecture was equally digressive. Most often than not, he deviated from the strict frontal view, which was favoured by architects for revealing the complex features of symmetry and proportion. Instead, Atget documented buildings at an angled position and occasionally in multiple views that were aimed to reveal a broader space. Architecture was wilfully presented alongside the appearance of its surrounding space, allowing in this way a more undisclosed, intimate sense of place. The following example in which vernacular architecture is shown to withstand the passing of time is a case in point:

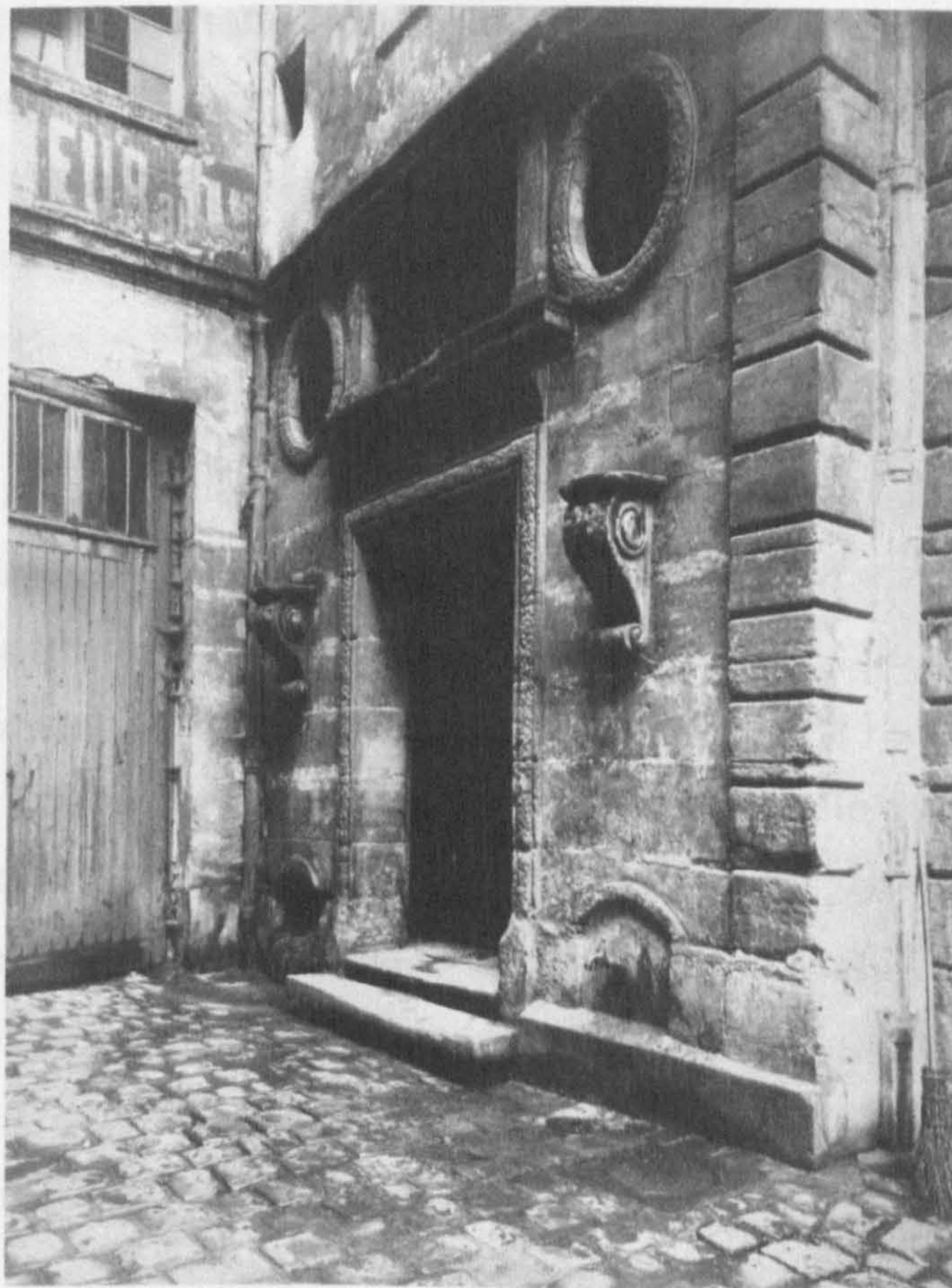
A pair of images is titled *Ancienne maitrise (Former choir school), Saint-Eustache, 25 rue du Jour (1^{er} arr.), 1902*. [See Image 1.2] Situated in an



1.2 Eugene Atget, *Ancienne maitrise (Former choir school), Saint Eustache, 25 rue du Jour (1^{er} arr.), 1902*.

alley, the entrance to the building is centrally depicted in the first photograph amidst the darkness of an open door to the left and the dark space of a garage from which a parked cart emerges, on the right. The vehicle is covered in protective material as if it was kept in reserve or withdrawn from a day's work. To the right of the cart, in the lower corner of the image foreground sits a large empty basket, presumably a means of transport associated with the goods of a trade. On the front steps of the former choir school, a figure of a child sits at a distance. In this first view, the observer is left to examine the textures of the worn surfaces in the condition of the buildings and the cobblestone.

In the second image of this subject where the angle of view is much narrower,



1.3 Eugene Atget, *Ancienne maison de la maitrise* (Former choir school), Saint-Eustache, 25 rue du Jour (1^{er} arr.), 1902.

Atget concentrates on the appearance of the entrance itself. [See Image 1.3]

It is comprised of worn steps, dark crevices, intricate ornamentation, a fountain, and again, the various textures of decay. On the far right edge, a broom constructed from a simple rod and hay is neatly erected in a corner. The actual degree to which the building may be resilient or may be falling apart, we do not know. We are fairly certain however, inasmuch as our eyes can testify that someone has attended to the entrance and its immediate space is a tidy one. In speculating further, one can assume that despite the absence of the child, Atget took both of these pictures on the same day by the corresponding presence of the broom. But from the appearance of this more exclusive view, where Atget had opportune chance to concentrate on the architectural features of his subject, it becomes apparent that his photographic practice did not include the removal of any potentially distracting objects from the spaces of his picture frame, no matter how effortless the task may have been. He did not seek to arrange his subjects, in order to obtain a more attractive effect in their depiction. It may be said that Atget veritably welcomed, or even visualised the social contexts for the objects in his photographs.

Atget's photographs provide potential evidence for historical occurrences to the extent that prosaic objects such as carts, baskets and brooms – all of the discreet traces of routine life in the city – are recorded with equal impartiality by his camera. The camera does not discriminate, for this was well noted since the early days of image making, by one of the inventors of photography himself, William Henry Fox Talbot. With reference to one of his own city views of architecture, the unsightly appearance of chimneys spoiling his picturesque view of the horizon was a cause for notation. "The instrument chronicles whatever it sees," Talbot wrote about the camera in 1843, "and certainly would delineate a chimney-pot or a chimney-sweeper with the same impartiality as it would the Apollo Belvedere."¹⁶ Atget was undoubtedly mindful of this attribute, seeing as evidence of his approach: "He did not much care what appeared at

¹⁶ Ian Jeffrey, *Photography: A Concise History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1981), 12.

the sides, just so long as the central subject was right.”¹⁷ Owing to an abundance of arresting details, his source images were actually too comprehensive. Clusters of posters were glued to the sides of historic buildings, or in the appearance of an early morning dispatch of milk jugs left unattended on sidewalks, which caused repeated interruptions similar to Talbot’s chimneys; incidentally stirring up more often than not, a far less idealising view of the city. What’s more, when viewing Atget’s photographs, and especially in any large quantity, it becomes apparent that not even the human form escapes the raw rendering of incidentals. Blurred figures of small children appear at a distance or curiously peek at the camera through windows and doorways, shop owners attempt to pose, and curious passers-by stand in awe of the photographic apparatus. For the photographic camera in general and for Atget’s camera in particular, such raw recording was to contribute to an appealing way of seeing amongst the 20th century avant-garde that was becoming increasingly dispassionate. Moreover, by the year of Benjamin’s death in 1940, the mechanical aspect of photographic technology that was inducing mechanical vision surmounted to an extent that it was visualised for historiography as well:

A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that ever happened should be regarded as lost for history.¹⁸

Like a camera device, the historian in Benjamin’s aphorism is an impartial chronicler. The implication of this claim is that history proper is bound to lose a distinct “aura” of its own. It is to be deprived of its absolute and authoritative character and is projected to embody a more transient, provisional nature, contingent upon the temperance of the recording device. In this respect it bears a resemblance to the attributes of the photograph itself. More

¹⁷ Laure Beaumont-Maillet, Introduction to *Atget Paris* (California: Gingko Press, 1992), 24.

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, ‘Thesis on the Philosophy of History’, in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), 246.

importantly however, history seen in this way suggests that it is a space that is always, in some measure, half concealed and far from view. It contains details that each time have been neglected or overlooked, at the expense of others. It exists as an open, yet an incomplete space, for which Benjamin demanded that its fragments be deciphered and brought to light, as well as allowed to stand free and conflict with others.¹⁹ Subsequently, relinquishing such an aura could only lead to a less stifling, more immediate, and much needed alternative form of history.

For Benjamin, who was inspired by both Surrealism as well as Marxism, history or the lifeless matter of the past was not separated from the present. It had a constructive role to play. The past was embedded in a world of material things that was open for inspection, where even the most mundane objects were capable of being transformed into historical evidence. It was not only works of art but also the less noble, insignificant objects of mass culture detected in commodities or collectibles that could inform the present and potentially foster a discerning eye. In his crime scene allegory, the political significance Benjamin claimed to saturate Atget's images is presumably the consequence of how the observer is made to see. A deserted crime scene comprises a mysterious, playful scheme, much in the vein of the Surrealist imagination. Benjamin writes:

It is in these achievements that Surrealist photography sets the scene for a salutary estrangement between man and his surroundings. It gives free play to the politically educated eye, under whose gaze all intimacies are sacrificed to the illumination of detail.²⁰

¹⁹ Benjamin believed that all history writing empathised with the victors and expressed bourgeois values. For his generation, he sought to break this continuum by means of materialistic historiography, which was considered to provide a unique experience with the past by carrying out arrests or stoppages of all kinds. The idea is that the flow of thoughts in the homogeneous course of history are meant to be interrupted in order to make place for the oppressed past. Put simply, the "task of every historical materialist is to brush history against the grain". Ibid., 248, 254.

²⁰ Walter Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography', in *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London, New York: Verso, 2006), 251.

Devoid of people, there was a peculiar aesthetic underlying Atget's work. It is the "Atget aesthetic", which Max Kozloff has so explicitly described as the uncanny experience "of being abandoned in a communal place".²¹ However the photographs generate more than a sensation that is caused by an invitation to see that which is rarely shown. For the viewer, they work to provoke the spirit of inquiry and stimulate a critical eye.

If Atget and his photographic documents bear any resemblance to Benjamin's historian, it is foremost because they were composed from what was literally present in front of his camera, simultaneously disregarding all interest whatsoever to depict anything as being perfect, or better than in reality. Alongside the eternal beauty of architecture, artefacts and relics, Atget's historical Paris was equally emphasised as a palpable, lived in space that was saturated with the physical evidence of worn surfaces and decay. But he did not stop at this. Even in the most impersonal context of unimaginative vocational practice, Atget chose his subjects carefully and proceeded by giving them a social dimension that was unprecedentedly rooted in the present; ostensibly managing to suspend time.

Modern Atget scholars Maria Morris Hambourg and Molly Nesbit appear to agree that Atget's treatment of history contains elements of his own devising. Hambourg claims that history for Atget was not found in the various texts of literature, but rather in the "texture" of the past:

As a picture maker he found the litany of historic events and former occupants secondary; what counted was the distinctive physiognomy acquired through time.²²

²¹ Max Kozloff, 'Abandoned and Seductive: Atget's Streets', in *The Privileged Eye* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 288.

²² Maria Morris Hambourg, 'A Biography of Eugène Atget' in *The Work of Atget: Volume II, The Art of Old Paris*, ed., John Szarkowski and Maria Morris Hambourg (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1985), 17.

And Molly Nesbit has commented on Atget's tendency to let "modern life in at the edges of his pictures".²³ She argues that disruptions such as these are the result of a certain ambivalence towards the requisites imposed by the ideology of an aestheticised, antiquarian history; a sector whose objectives thrived on the picturesque. It was this sort of visionary speculation of the past, which had created and sustained the aura of history. Yet Atget had a diverse mix of clientele, his interests were not limited to catering for antiquarians. He lived and worked at a time when there was a growing national interest in the preservation of the old parts of the city, where all sorts of information and ideas about the French national past could be exchanged. To be sure, if Atget's archive generally appears to subvert the prevailing romantic notions of the nation's past, this is because through his practice, he carried a conviction that he could play a part in presenting some kind of alternative form of history. Ian Jeffrey makes the point of noting that it was actually Atget's acceptance of the great cultural work of the past, the work that was completed long before his time, which allowed him to disregard the ideal and to focus his attention on the everyday.²⁴ Nesbit sees this happening more pronounced in the holdings of the Bibliothèque Nationale, generally known as the BN albums.²⁵ This is a structured body of work depicting places and objects, compiled and sold to the French State by Atget himself, where history has been treated in the "present tense".²⁶ In these albums, modern life is put on display through the import of motifs belonging to a broad, collective social sphere: interior design, commerce, mass transportation and recycling. Such motifs comprise an index for which the organisation of society can be measured, where with hindsight, appearances and trends are the stock from which to portray the progress of

²³ Molly Nesbit, 'The Use of History,' *Art in America*, vol. 74 (February 1986), 78.

²⁴ Ian Jeffrey, 'Fragment and Totality in Photography,' *History of Photography*, vol. 16, no. 4 (Winter 1992), 353.

²⁵ Atget began to produce a number of thematic albums from 1909-1915 in reaction to the decline in sales to institutions. The holdings of the Bibliothèque Nationale comprise seven such albums.

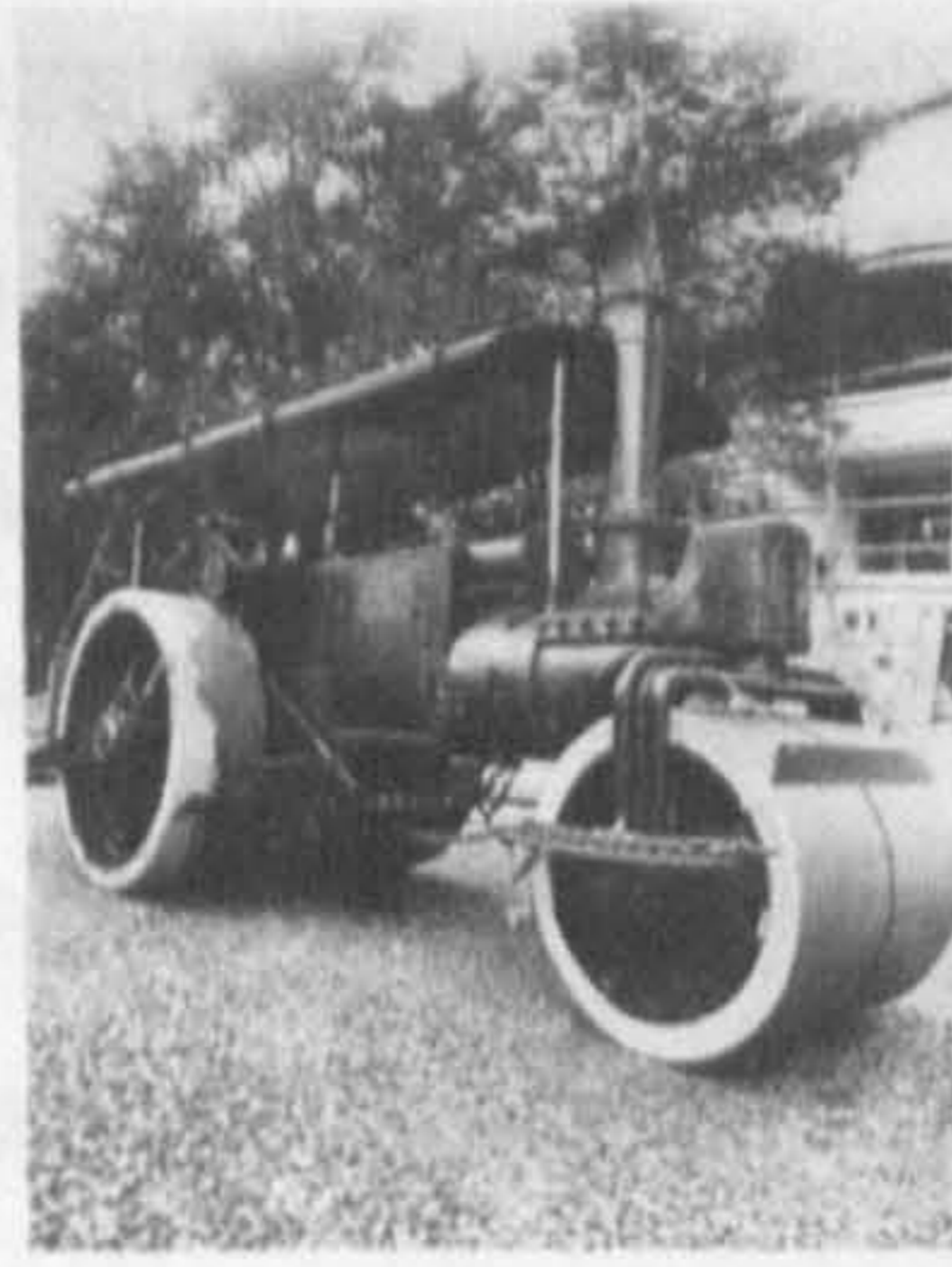
²⁶ Nesbit claims that the BN albums "deliberately present the underside of the picturesque". She contends that their content focuses on the differences of class custom by which the images attempt to establish a political relation to history. Molly Nesbit, 'The Use of History,' *Art in America*, vol. 74 (February 1986), 79.

an entire era. Atget systematically recorded, classified and distributed such subjects with a disinterested stance that verged on the gaze of an archaeologist.²⁷ Through his photographic compilations of common objects and familiar places, once again he was ultimately striving to show something broader. In doing so, he was actually engaging in a discourse between the present and the past and making the transformations caused by modern life in the city his central concern.

Modernity in Paris

In 1910, Atget compiled an album titled *La Voiture à Paris* (Vehicles in Paris), which he then sold to the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. The series of images contained therein depicted the traditional means of transport at the turn of the century in Paris. [See Image 1.4] These vehicles, a collection of horse-drawn carriages that were intended for animals to pull throughout the city streets, were uniformly presented in a stationary view at a three quarter degree angle. Motionless and framed with a minimum of distractions, each cart is isolated to reveal its own unique form, and to eventually disclose its probable use to the viewer. What's more, each image is given a simple title analogous to that use, followed by the date of production. In looking at such an album, the viewer is in the position to appreciate not only the characteristic details of a particular vehicle, for example the hanging metal jugs lined across the length of a dairy cart, but is also attentive to the possible differences between the vehicles of different use. "A First Class Hearse" is a highly ornamented object, for example, whereas a taxi or a steamroller is not. In addition to studying the features of these objects in terms of their appearance, one can also make other types of notations about transportation in general, which pertain for example, to just what sort of things get transported in the

²⁷ Max Kozloff, 'Abandoned and Seductive: Atget's Streets', in *The Privileged Eye* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 286.



1.4 Eugene Atget, *Vehicles in Paris, 1910*:
(top) *First-class hearse, Steamroller, Dairy cart,*
(Center) *Water cart, Bernot coal cart, Solid-tired cab,*
(bottom) *Haulage cart wagon, Black Maria (vehicle for transporting prisoners), Distiller's cart.*

first place: milk, water, charcoal etc. As a further matter, the viewer can even proceed to visualise various aspects of the professions behind the use of these vehicles. He or she can envision the work of a milkman distributing his stock, or the work of a policeman maneuvering a cart designed to transport prisoners. The album facilitates an imagining of early 20th century city life in a multitude of ways, since society at large appears to be embedded in the very heterogeneity of carts as an object.

At the time of the production of *Vehicles in Paris*, automobiles had long made their appearance. The first automobile show in the world had been held in Paris in 1898. In most other parts of the city and for the next years spanning up to the end of his career, automobiles had become a common sight but Atget rarely had an interest to include them in his photographs. In addition, he appears to have systematically avoided the great monuments and spectacular landmarks such as the Eiffel tower, during which its recent construction was for that time, a symbol identifying France as a prominent, economic world power.

In an effort to discover the photographer's elusive character, Jean-Claude Lemagny, the photographic historian and conservator at the Bibliothèque Nationale has described Atget as "a man with deep roots in the past".²⁸ In respect to style and subject, his images were conventional, derived from the tradition of topographic illustration that was established well before his time. And with regard to technique, his camera and choice of materials were in every respect, traditional.²⁹ Acute awareness to his surroundings however, did not render him static or immobile. On the contrary, his acumen allowed him the liberty of moving about at will. His passive observation of particulars and stock taking activities granted him complete mobility to formulate, that which Walker Evans would later claim as the clinical process of "a photographic editing of society".³⁰

It is worth taking a look at the world in which Atget lived. Only to see for what reasons he was so adamant that for him, the making of documents was more

²⁸ Jean-Claude Lemagny, 'Atget the Prophet,' in *Atget the Pioneer* (Munich, London, New York: Prestel, 2000), 14.

²⁹ All of Atget's photographs were albumen prints. Up to the end of the 1920's, Atget continued to use this 19th century process comprised of paper impregnated with whipped and salted egg white, which was exposed to sunlight until the image appeared. Laure Beaumont-Maillet, Introduction to *Atget Paris* (California: Gingko Press, 1992), 26.

³⁰ Alan Trachtenberg, 'A Book Nearly Anonymous,' in *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (Hill and Wang, 1990), 237.

worthy than any other type of subjective rendering; doing one's best to distance himself from any established pictorial code or artistic coterie. However in order to better understand his endeavour, it is paramount to see the world Atget deliberately omitted from his picture frames. During the years Atget was photographically active, automobiles had replaced horse drawn carriages, craft was giving way to mass production, the medieval streets were superseded by the grand boulevards initiated by Baron Haussmann, and vernacular building facades were substituted with the imposing size of modern architecture. Atget worked at a time of rigorous, modern urban renewal. As a matter of fact, the scenes in the majority of his Paris views no longer resembled the documents he had made of them, even in his own lifetime as the result of rampant changes caused by the practices of demolition and construction in his immediate environment. Changes that Atget made it his business of systematically recording.³¹ My point being, that the present was becoming rapidly displaced to a modern, alienating experience of the future, pervading each subject with singular qualities as a result. It is within these parameters that Atget engaged in both photography as well as history, and with which his documentary project was concerned.

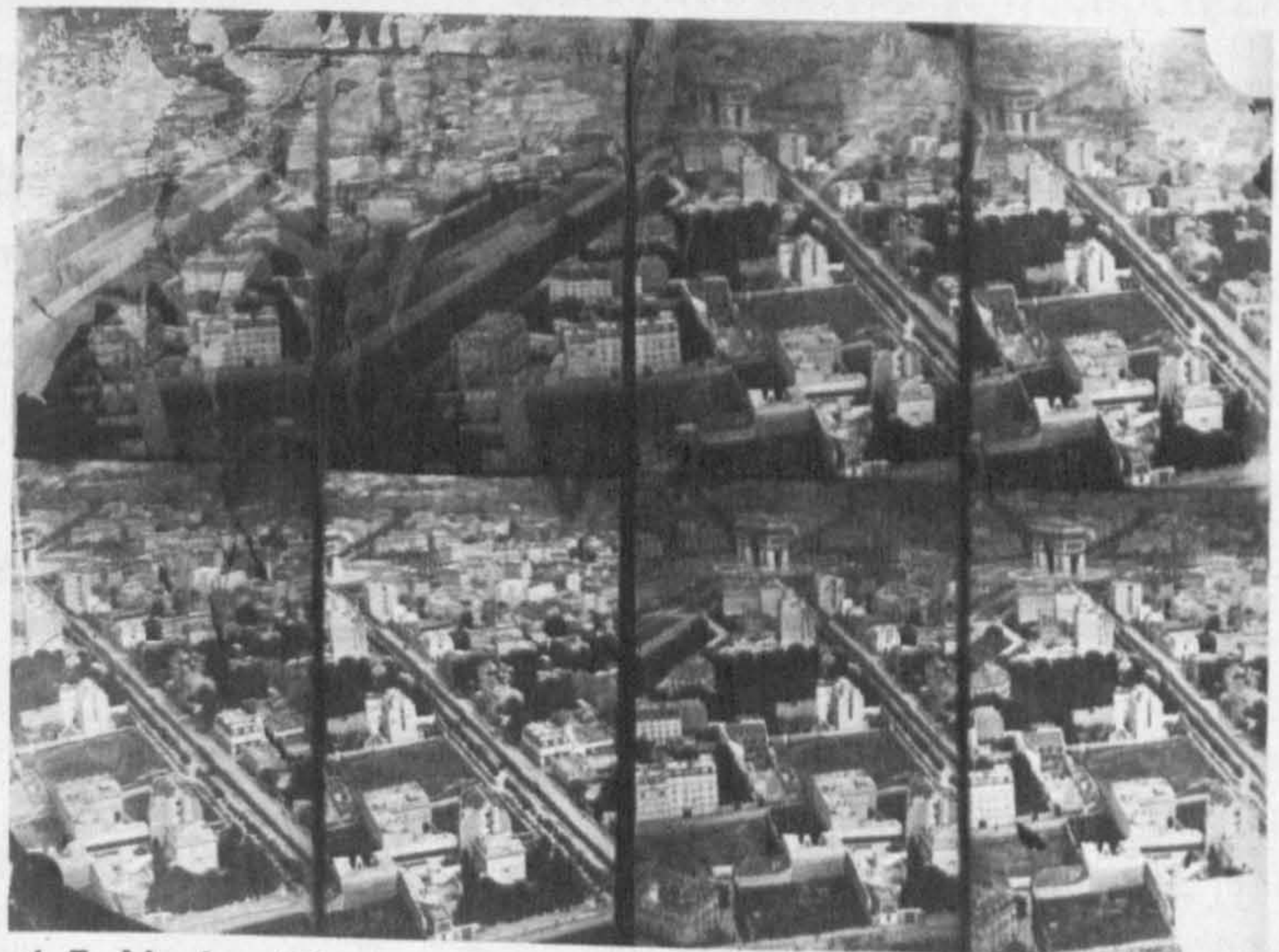
Once again, the work of Walter Benjamin is instrumental. *The Arcades Project* attempts to capture the zeitgeist of 19th century urban life while critically surveying the bourgeois values in Paris, the city that was to be Benjamin's residence during his life in exile. Sporadically interposing commentary amongst the many hundreds of citations meticulously researched from the views of the day, Benjamin's own revolutionary project was equally comprised of an enormous, perplexing mass of disparate documents. In a chapter titled "Haussmannization, Barricade Fighting", the modern technology of urban planning becomes the subject of scrutiny, which is of special interest

³¹ See David Harris, *Eugène Atget: Unknown Paris* (New York: The New Press, 2003), vii., based on the exhibition of the same title (in Paris, New York and Toronto). The work is exemplary of how Atget carried out his profession as an architectural, urban photographer in Paris, while it examines the holdings of the Musée Carnavalet, purchased directly from Atget himself.

to the matter at hand. It is telling of the world into which Atget was born, the environment in which he lived, and the social circumstances that were to influence his work.

The renovation of Paris, which began in the mid 1850's by the civic planner Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann (1801-1891) entailed amongst other things, the widening of streets, the building of parks and gardens and a city-wide network of trains, drinking water and sewers. His policies however, which extended well past his lifetime and into the beginning of 20th century, had managed to destroy much of Old Paris and to create a new, unrecognisable city. As early as 1863, Haussmann's broad, linear boulevards were viewed as cutting immense gaps through the city fabric of densely built, working class neighbourhoods, which were referred to as "surgical experiments", with changes so detrimental that one needed a compass to find his way.³² His plans were critically viewed by many as being nothing more than grandiose acts, inspired by vanity and repression. Urban renewal sought to manicure the streets, line them with tall trees and extravagant buildings with broad perspectives

towards enormous monuments. It was at this time that the French photographer Nadar attempted to photograph the new city from the air, successfully reproducing a bird's eye view from the basket of a hot air balloon. [See Image 1.5] Taken with the multi-lens camera in 1868, Nadar's



1.5 Nadar (Gaspard Félix Tournachon), *The Arc de Triomphe and the Grand Boulevards, Paris, from a Balloon, 1868.*

³² Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 133, 136.

image shows the Arc de Triumph as a central point from which the new magnificent roads diverged like the radii of a circle. Moreover, on the subject of architecture, the imperative to create solid, heavy, “vulgar” buildings had long been viewed responsible for the imprisonment of Art, and for a tired imagination that “could no longer be great but rather is exhausted in representing”.³³ By the year 1926, one year prior to Atget’s death, it was claimed that,

Paris now ceased forever to be a conglomeration of small towns, each with its distinctive physiognomy and way of life – where one was born and where one died, where one never dreamed of leaving home, and where nature and history had collaborated to realize variety in unity. The centralization, the magalomania, created an artificial city, in which the Parisian (and this is the crucial point) no longer feels at home; and so, as soon as he can, he leaves.³⁴

The new streets became endlessly lined with uniform apartment facades and their “continuous rows of houses that are always the same house”.³⁵ What’s more, the propensity for progressive subdividing increased in order to accommodate the greatest amount of people in the most considerably economised space, constructing “pigeonholes” for living quarters.³⁶ More importantly however, Haussmann’s project for the construction of a “New” Paris was implicated in a broader scheme. The displacement of the narrow, crooked lanes of the medieval city had a strategic aim: to secure the city from future riots by making barricade fighting more difficult, and “to turn the city into

³³ “Let us look around us....Ever more monuments, ever more palaces. On all sides rise up great stone blocks, and everything tends toward the solid, the heavy, the vulgar; the genius of art is imprisoned by such an imperative, in which the imagination no longer has any room to play, can no longer be great, but rather is exhausted in representing....the tiered orders on facades and in decorating friezes and the borders of window frames.” Ibid., 139 [E8a.2]. Excerpt 1845.

³⁴ Ibid., 129 [E3a,6]. Excerpt 1926.

³⁵ Ibid., 146 [E12a,4]. Excerpt 1868.

³⁶ Ibid., 139 [E8a.2]. Excerpt 1845.

a luxury city pure and simple".³⁷ The economy was privileged over politics to create a recreational city that would facilitate a new world of consumption. Claude Monet's painting *Boulevard des Capucines* illustrates the vast space comprising the new boulevards along with the spontaneous flux of urban life they harbour. [See Image 1.6] In Monet's painting of 1874, both traffic and people are shown as static, leisurely mingling, as well as blurred and moving about in an elevated perspective under tall trees and an airy, open sky. Crowds casually enter and exit the picture frame, as the new city is viewed as a recreation ground that is home to both work and play. The economy was privileged over politics to accommodate wealth and luxury, where real estate prices soared, industry and trade prospered, and the bourgeois world expanded, to be manifest in department stores and world expositions.³⁸



1.6 Claude Monet, *Boulevard des Capucines, Paris (Les Grands Boulevards)*, 1873-74. Oil on canvas.

The first World Fair, which was held at the Crystal Palace in London in 1851 was characterised as a "bazaar of universal progress", a place where the

³⁷ "This method is called Haussmann... cutting long, straight, broad streets right through closely built working-class neighbourhoods and lining them on both sides with big luxurious buildings, the intention having been, apart from the strategic aim of making barricade fighting more difficult, to develop a specifically Bonapartist building-trades proletariat dependent on the government, and to turn the city into a luxury city pure and simple." Ibid., 145 [E12,1]. Excerpt 1938.

³⁸ The World Fair took place in Paris in 1855, 1867, 1889, 1900 and 1937.

Parisian could see “every industry exhibiting its trophies”.³⁹ Subsequently, in the Paris exposition of 1867 one could stroll the galleries and survey the state of any particular industry in all different countries.⁴⁰ What struck the intellect was not what people are making today, but foremost, the things that will be made in the future.⁴¹ By the year 1900, it was noted that the world of free trade that was epitomised in expositions had evolved into a spectacle, where each nation’s “participation becomes representation” and by which during the course of such increasingly complex venues, “the government of each country can be considered a veritable entrepreneur”.⁴² It must have been an anticipated view, when in fact the Eiffel Tower was purposely built to serve as an entrance arch for the 1889 World Fair, the year that also marked the centennial celebration of the French Revolution. For the visitor, the spectacular views it provided over the city must have made it a breathtaking attraction. In 1900, by looking down from above, the French novelist Emile Zola made a photograph from the Eiffel of a restaurant on the ground below, producing in this way an abstract pattern of space that was comprised of tables, people and pathways. [See Image 1.7] It is foretelling of the radical perspectives that future photographers would be exploring systematically, in the next decades to come. Like Nadar’s hot air balloon a few generations earlier, the Eiffel Tower concretized the thrill and fascination of reaching

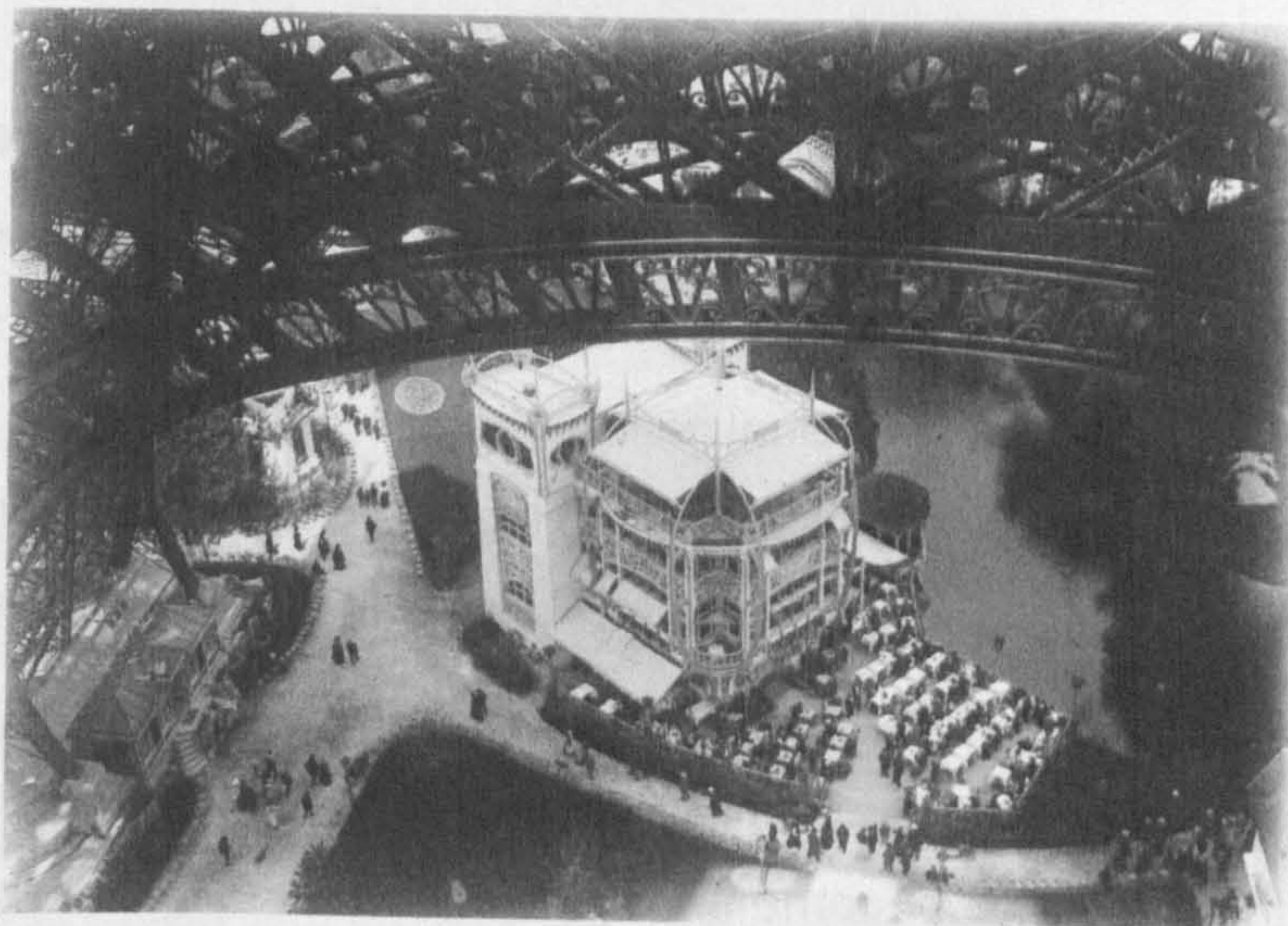
³⁹ “Every industry, in exhibiting its trophies
In this bazaar of universal progress,
Seems to have borrowed a fairy’s magic wand
To bless the Crystal Palace.” This excerpt is from the theatrical performance *Le Palais de Cristal, ou Les Parisiens à Londres*. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 191 [G10a,2]. Excerpt 1851.

⁴⁰ “...by strolling around the galleries, one could... survey the state of one particular industry in all the different countries, whereas, by strolling up the avenues that crossed them, one could survey the state of the different branches of industry in each particular country.” This citation refers to the Paris World Fair, 1867. *Ibid.*, 189 [G9,2]. Excerpt 1907.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 176 [G2a,4]. Excerpt 1870.

⁴² “In 1851 we were living in the era of free trade... For some decades now, we have witnessed the spread of protectionism... Participation in the exhibition becomes... a sort of representation...; and whereas in 1850 the ruling tenet was that the government need not concern itself in this affair, the situation today is so far advanced that the government of each country can be considered a veritable entrepreneur.” *Ibid.*, 183 [G5a,5]. Excerpt 1900.

elevated heights that was manifested in flying machines and skyscrapers. The Eiffel Tower was considered a modern symbol of universal progress. As the world's tallest structure, it was undoubtedly the most famous construction of the epoch. However,



1.7 Emile Zola, *A Restaurant, Taken from the First Floor or Staircase of the Eiffel Tower, Paris, 1900.*

despite its distinction, it nevertheless felt like a “knickknack” where it was met with a storm of protest.⁴³ It was not unanimously celebrated by all. It was considered useless and monstrous, threatening to French art as well as to French history, considered to debase all monuments and to diminish all architecture.⁴⁴ Yet remarkably, within a short time of its completion, the vast revenue from the modern tourist attraction had managed to surpass the excessive costs of its construction.⁴⁵ If these are just some of the ways that Modernity would affect the landscape of the city, what kind of influence did it have on its inhabitants?

In 1903, the German sociologist Georg Simmel wrote about the unequivocal effects of capital and the growing circulation of commodities on the mind of the individual who resides in the city. Forever obliged to moderate a

⁴³ Ibid., 163 [F5a,7]. Excerpt 1931.

⁴⁴ “Protest against the Eiffel Tower: ‘We come as writers, painters, sculptors, architects,... in the name of French art and French history, both of which are threatened,... to protest against the construction, in the very heart of our capital, of the useless and monstrous Eiffel Tower... Its barbarous mass overwhelms Notre-Dame, the Sainte-Chapelle, the Tower of Saint-Jaques. All our monuments are debased, our architecture diminished.’” Ibid., 168 [F8,2]. Excerpt 1937.

⁴⁵ “The centennial celebration, in fact, was so successful that the Eiffel Tower, which cost 6 million francs, had already earned, by the fifth of November, 6,459,581 francs.” Ibid., 189 [G9,1]. Excerpt 1901.

ceaseless bombardment of stimuli in his surroundings, the metropolitan type counterbalances such conditions by reacting in an increasingly rational, calculating manner, prompting what Simmel claimed, an attitude of indifference. In the crowded spaces of the metropolis, he maintained that the effects of this intellectual distancing become magnified, spurring loneliness and alienation. What's more, living amongst the sombre, organising forces of exchange, Simmel argued that money is accountable for the impersonal relations between people, owing to the fact that unlike the rural areas, conditions prevailed by which the producer and buyer no longer knew each other. Objects become anonymous, nondescript, as well as growing in profusion. On this account, the qualitative distinction between things becomes reduced in a way which is beyond repair. The uniqueness and peculiarity in things becomes overshadowed by a sense of colourlessness and homogeneity. As a result, their distinction as well as selection is experienced as meaningless. Simmel contended that for the individual, the overwhelming "money economy" of the metropolis eliminated all connection to progress and spirituality, to the extent that money could become "the frightful leveller" and "the common denominator of all values".⁴⁶ Moreover, by 1928, marking one year subsequent to Atget's death, and in a similar tenor of general alarm, "the commodity" it was claimed, "has become an abstraction": once it escapes from the hands of the producer, it manages to gain autonomy and "leads a life of its own".⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Simmel arrives at this conclusion by having previously claimed that, "This psychic mood is the correct subjective reflection of a complete money economy, to the extent that money takes the place of all the manifoldness of things and expresses all qualitative distinctions between them in the distinction of how much." Georg Simmel, 'The "Metropolis and Mental Life,' in *The Blackwell City Reader*, ed. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 14.

⁴⁷ "In the language of the commodities exchange, cotton 'soars,' copper 'slumps,' corn 'is active,' coal 'is sluggish,' wheat 'is on the road to recovery,' and petroleum 'displays a healthy trend.' Things have gained autonomy, and they take on human features..." Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 181 [G5,1]. Excerpt 1928.

Imaging Modernity

In reference to Atget's photographic practice, within such a context of radical change, the making of "documents" must have been a critical way of making sense of the world. Annalistic documentation simply may have been a means to alleviate the turbulence of modern life, which had increasingly come to pose a visible threat to culture and tradition while radically transforming various strands of personal, social and political life. It was amongst a time characterised by transition that Atget actively embarked on rendering history. Yet our foremost understanding of history is implicated in the study of past events. Generally speaking, we are accustomed to believe that history surfaces to become intelligible only after a certain amount of time has elapsed.⁴⁸ I wish to look further at the impact of modernisation in 20th century Paris, and to explore the ways in which transition fundamentally alters our perception of time. In doing so I wish to demonstrate that for Atget, the experience of modernity was a determinant factor in developing a particular historical sensibility for the visuality in his work.

Max Kozloff considers the overwhelming accumulation of objects in Atget's photographs to be the most compelling feature of Atget's visuality.

Time and time again, Atget indicates signs or articles of communal life – advertisements, magazines, cafes, windows, clothes, price tags, suitcases, furniture, kitchenware, bistros, benches, and so on – insisting that they are understandable in terms of their history, whereas they actively promote a deep anxiety about their future.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ The critic Max Kozloff has responded to an obvious sense of displacement in Atget's work in relation to time as if he is looking at appearances from a temporal distance, by which it is rendered unbelievable when he writes, "It would delude us to think that an eye can look *back* on its own era, as things occur." (emphasis original) Max Kozloff, 'Abandoned and Seductive: Atget's Streets', in *The Privileged Eye* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 298.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 295.

Like Kozloff, we are astonished by an archive comprised of inventory. Atget's practice involved utilising the medium of photography not to record moving subjects, but exclusively to document the lasting material objects of the built environment in the midst of the fast-paced tempo of his modern epoch.⁵⁰ Inevitably we may begin to speculate why he appears to have consistently avoided showing all the great achievements of his day, such as monuments or automobiles. Kozloff suggests that subjects such as these were omitted because they belonged to Atget's "mental present" by which they "formed an image of the contemporary".⁵¹ We are virtually compelled, though in fact Kozloff himself does not directly make this claim, towards a syllogism of contempt for the contemporary. Could it be presumed, therefore, that a modern consciousness or a consciousness of modernity was at work? "To be modern", Marshall Berman the American cultural theorist and historian claims:

...is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are.⁵²

For Berman, "modernization" entails being well aware that the world is changing. In his view, it was the reverberations of this awareness that nourished so many of the achievements of art and literary thought in the 20th century that became broadly known as "modernism", including that of Walter Benjamin. To be sure, equally broad is Berman's interpretation of such a contentious topic as modernity itself. At the same time however, he does in fact identify something concrete of its nature when he specifies "modernisation" as resulting in complex social processes that give rise to a

⁵⁰ John Szarkowski has expressed amazement to the fact that Atget did not take pictures of people. Not a single portrait of a friend or associate was found amongst the thousands of images acquired posthumously by Bernice Abbot. In addition, he notes that Atget's early series of street traders describe the generic role and not the individual, and should not be considered portraiture. John Szarkowski, 'Atget, Pointing,' in *The Work of Atget: Volume I, Old France*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1981).

⁵¹ Max Kozloff, 'Abandoned and Seductive: Atget's Streets', in *The Privileged Eye* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 298.

⁵² Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London, New York: Verso, 1983), 15.

perpetual flux, “a maelstrom”, which is ultimately associated with the forces of “an ever-expanding, drastically fluctuating capitalist world market”.⁵³

In Atget's avoidance of the modern, we may begin to see something emerge within the partiality of his clinical documentation: the preference towards entering and experiencing a predominantly pre-industrial world that was left behind. Although they are mute of people, his photographs are charged with the overwhelming presence of people's lives. Collectively, the material world and the social contexts that his pictures bring to mind piece together fragments of a civil and domestic life that was in the process of being radically transformed.

While Berman frames modernity as a condition that generates a profound experience of transition and one which evokes reflection, another historian claims that the effect of these transitions elicits a particular type of response: one that alters our sense of temporality. The German historian Reinhart Koselleck claims that as early as 1815, and as a direct result of the social changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution, our appreciation of the temporal dimensions of “past”, “present” and “future”, which gives sensibility to one's experience of being in the world becomes irrevocably altered. Within these new experiences of transition, our appreciation of time is marked by a

⁵³ Berman breaks down the history of modernity into three phases: the first ranges from the beginning of the 16th century to the end of the 18th, the second he identifies with the French Revolution and the final with the 20th century. “The maelstrom of modern life has been fed from many sources: great discoveries in the physical sciences, changing our images of the universe and our place in it; the industrialisation of production, which transforms scientific knowledge into technology, creates new human environments and destroys old ones, speeds up the whole tempo of life, generates new forms of corporate power and class struggle; immense demographic upheavals, severing millions of people from their ancestral habitats, hurtling them halfway across the world into new lives; rapid and often cataclysmic urban growth; systems of mass communication, dynamic in their development, enveloping and binding together the most diverse people and societies; increasingly powerful national states, bureaucratically structured and operated, constantly striving to expand their powers; mass social movements of people, and peoples, challenging their political and economic rulers, striving to gain some control over their lives; finally, bearing and driving all these people and institutions along, an ever-expanding, drastically fluctuating capitalist world market.” Ibid., 16.

distinct sense of acceleration. In this way, the time during which one lives combined with the present state of affairs becomes clearly distinguished from the “past”, that is, from everything that went on before. At the same time however, the “future” becomes impregnated and conceived as something fundamentally “other”.⁵⁴ In essence, Koselleck claims that to experience transition results in becoming aware of the temporal dimensions of past and future in relation to the present as a *rupture*. As we are consumed with the unique experiences of the present, the present becomes severed from the past seeing that its distinctness as well as its dissimilarity to the past increases. And while we become accustomed to a constant anticipation of something new, we are increasingly challenged by the future in view of the fact that our certainty and confidence of what it will bring ultimately decreases.

Since urban development was uneven, these repercussions could not have possibly been encountered as a uniform, collective experience in Atget’s Paris. For the inhabitants of the newly built districts, the alienating experience of acceleration as delineated by Koselleck may have been a truly genuine predicament. But how equally was this sense of acceleration experienced in the medieval quarters of Old Paris? Compartmentalised as well as isolated from the other parts of the city, these poor, densely built working class neighbourhoods, which had existed for centuries, were actually tightly knit communities that harboured a way of life marked by tradition, and not transition or novelty. Here, time was not likely experienced to move at a much rapid pace at all, until they were ultimately designated for destruction.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ In the chapter “The Mutation of Historical Experience”, Koselleck writes, “Two specific temporal determinants characterise the new experience of transition: the expected otherness of the future and, associated with it, the alteration in the rhythm of temporal experience: acceleration, by means of which one’s own time is distinguished from what went before.” Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 241.

⁵⁵ The poverty stricken quarters of Old Paris were well known for their cramped, overall forsaken state and poor sanitary conditions, which in pre-welfare times led to starvation and epidemics. Berman attributes these horrific circumstances to the fact that the Parisian poor put up minimal resistance to urban regeneration. Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London, New York: Verso, 1983), 151.

For Atget and his images, whatever his personal position regarding the modernisation of his city may have been, what appears to be fundamentally at stake is the continuity connecting the present to the past. For along with the gradual demolition of the old quartiers also came the loss of what was presumably viewed as a more authentic way of life. Most notably, these neighbourhoods were home to small merchants and craftsmen of all kinds who foremost felt responsible for what they made and what they sold. They were places in which the rhythms of everyday life: behaviour, habits, customs, were established over time on a small, local scale. It was where social interaction was marked not only by intimacy because everyone tended to know each other but was also associated with a distinct sense of community that was not limited to class custom. More than just the loss of ancient buildings, Atget's images seem to convey poignancy respective to this more profound type of loss.

In contrast to the streets of the old neighbourhoods, whose lasting and seemingly organic development had evolved continuously over time, the great boulevards were a very different kind of space. Aside from being innovative by briskly moving traffic through the city in straight lines, they were also contrived to produce a very different type of social interaction. Most notably, their open spaces generated novel experiences just by bringing large amounts of people together.⁵⁶ Zoned with spectacular cafes, restaurants and department stores, social interaction was integrated with consumption, while the installation of various recreational elements such as benches, pavilions and promenades guaranteed hygienic walks. These sorts of experiences, which belonged to Atget's mental present, I would like to suggest, were strange and chasmic to anyone who was accustomed to the quieter kind of

⁵⁶ Berman claims that the boulevards, with their endless procession of strangers, provided people with the novel experience of being private in public. Berman's brilliant analysis of Baudelaire's "The Eyes of the Poor" demonstrates how the dynamic of observing others whilst showing oneself to others functions in enriching our vision of ourselves. *Ibid.*, 152.

life harboured in the historic districts. For someone with opportune chance to experience both, it is not difficult to imagine how the regenerated districts in effect appeared to alienate their inhabitants by comparison. All the qualities of urban living that today are taken for granted: the anonymity of crowds, the swift movement associated with motorised vehicles or the network of a rapid transit system, and the depersonalised experience of shopping at large department stores were for the early 20th century, all modern experiences that were apt to be identified with the future. In reference to Atget's disposition to evade this modern world, Maria Morris Hambourg reveals the historical sensibility that drove the propensity of Atget's vision:

He measured the present against the best of the past, and since modernity's virtue was unproven and progress chaotic (compared to the logical order and certitude of history), Atget was wary of the new and largely avoided it.⁵⁷

While we try to draw out Atget's modernity, what emerges is the reaction against the uncertainty and scepticism associated with the conditions of an imperfect present, as well as with the events in the time to come. Perhaps his greatest achievement, although he may not have been aware of it, was to effectively translate this conflict into pictorially rich and exciting ways. Hambourg's well-researched biography, methodically piecing together the obscurity of Atget's unknown life indicates that he was after all, a cultured and well-learned man.⁵⁸ We discover that he read voraciously, consulted any number of relevant resources pertaining to his photographic projects and kept up with the political issues of the day. It is not surprising therefore that Atget should possess a keen interest in the general subject of labour or "forms of trade". It is a subject that seemed to fascinate him, comprising a rich part of Atget's archive and explored continuously to the end of his life. It is also a

⁵⁷ Maria Morris Hambourg, 'A Biography of Eugène Atget' in *The Work of Atget: Volume II, The Art of Old Paris*, ed., John Szarkowski and Maria Morris Hambourg (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1985), 27.

⁵⁸ The abundance of books and various artefacts found in the library of Atget's apartment indicate his diverse cultural interests such as painting and the art of caricature; including an impressive collection of literature and dramatic works with a special interest in those that critically analysed French society. *Ibid.*, 21, 22.

motif that when viewed collectively, not only reveals striking changes in the production and consumption of goods at the turn of the century, but also gives away subtle indications of Atget's struggle with modernity. In order to trace these changes, I would like to compare a brief selection of this imagery.

As early as 1898, Atget produced a series of photographs portraying street vendors displaying their wares. The first image, *Marchand italien de statuettes, 1898-1899* (Italian peddling statuettes) belongs to this series. [See Image 1.8] As an inexperienced photographer embarking on a new trade,

Les Petits Métiers de Paris (Salesmen and Traders on the Streets of Paris)

represented a popular pictorial tradition of his era, which could warrant him favourable prospects towards commercial success.⁵⁹

The photographs generally depict people in various lines of work: window washing, knife grinding, a park attendant. And although the subjects are less uniformly presented than Atget's later work, the series operates much in effect as "Vehicles in Paris", that is, the associations it throws up invite the viewer to inspect a more general theme in all its variations. In this series it is the commodity itself. With these

pictures, Atget illustrates that everyday

objects such as flowers, bread and umbrellas are sold on the street. He also makes reference to less vital products that were aimed to solve the various



1.8 Eugene Atget, *Marchand italien de statuettes* (Italian peddling statuettes), Avenue de l'Observatoire (14^e arr.), c. 1898 - 1899.

⁵⁹ Selections from this series were manufactured into post cards. Approximately a decade later they were to be compiled into an album and sold to the Bibliothèque Nationale, comprising one of the seven BN albums. It should be noted that prints illustrating subjects such as travelling traders and old-fashioned occupations was a popular genre dating back to the 16th century. Andreas Kruse, 'Archive of Visions-Inventory of Things Eugène Atget's Paris,' in *Paris Eugène Atget 1857-1927* (Taschen, 2000), 84.

decorating needs of the day such as lampshades or figurines. The photograph "Italian peddling statuettes" depicts a young male immigrant offering to sell a medium-sized classical statuette, a replica no doubt, and certainly one of the many popular items available that allowed for an inexpensive means of fashionable décor.⁶⁰

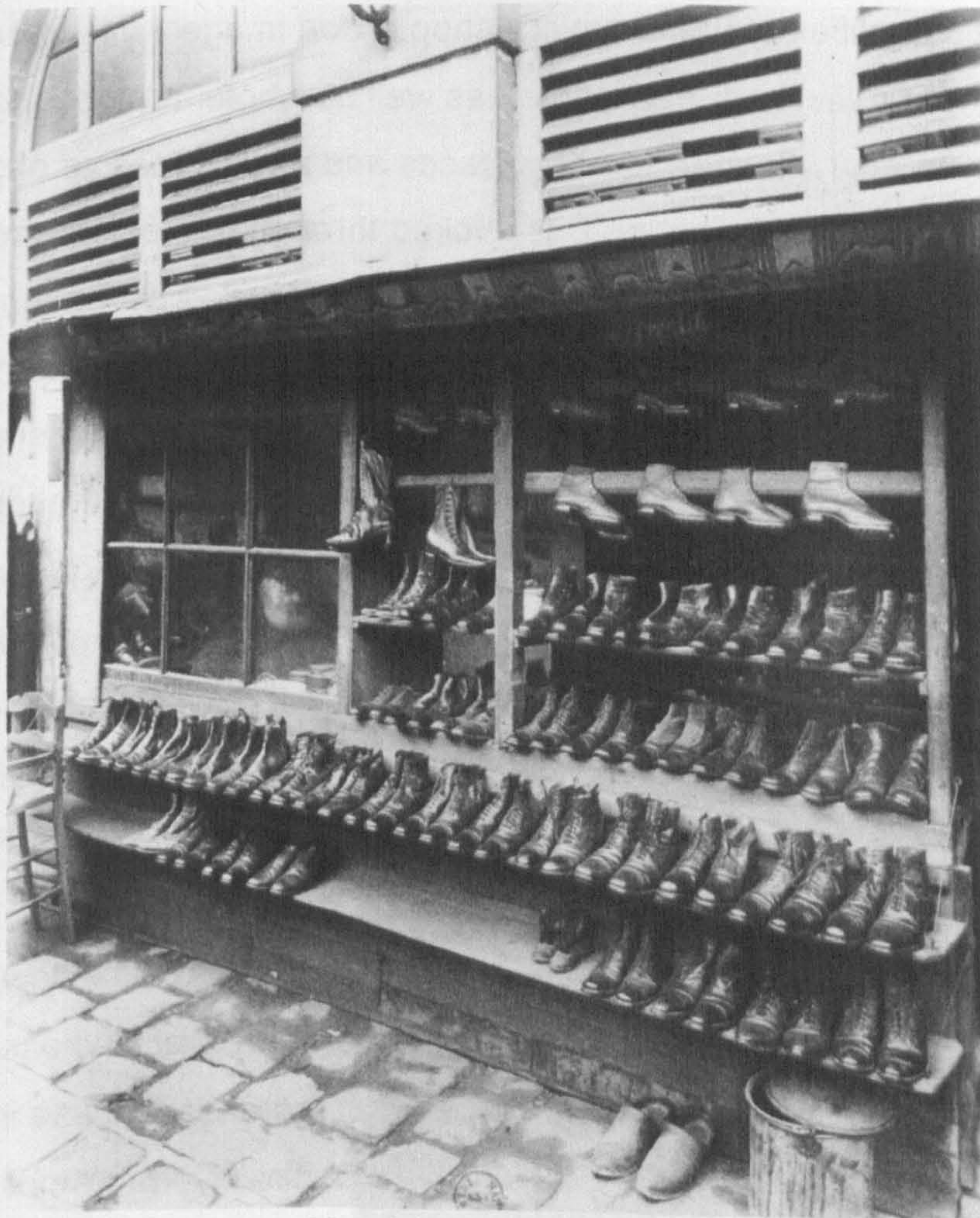
In the years to come, retail shops presenting more diverse articles for sale were explored with analogous interest to the street vendors, as Atget further looked to the appearances of kiosks, covered markets, small shops and department stores. Atget conceived of compiling an album of all such subjects titled *Métiers, boutiques et étalages* (Trades, Shops, Window-Displays) as well as the related album, *Enseignes et vieilles boutiques de Paris* (Signs and Old Shops in Paris).⁶¹ The photograph *Sur le marché des Carmes, place Maubert, 1911* (In Carmes Market, Place Maubert), is an image depicting a shoemaker peering through the window of his shop interior at the moment that his wares are displayed outdoors; neatly hanging or lined up in a series of long rows on the sidewalk. [See Image 1.9]

Atget's late imagery produced after the Great War varies significantly from his earlier work. In the 1920's for example, we find many pictures where Atget curiously looks at the store windows found immediately on the great boulevards. We find that he even took a photograph of a store selling automobiles, which is not to say that the usual recording of more commonplace subjects ceased to continue.⁶² In the next two photographs I wish to examine, Atget looks at the more contemporary trades of his day: a chemist's shop and a hairdresser. *Boutique (Shop), Boulevard de Strasbourg, 10^e arr., 1921* depicts a chemist's shop specialising in what appears to be

⁶⁰ Atget is to explore the subject of fashionable décor at length, in his series *Intérieurs parisiens* (Paris Interiors) of 1910.

⁶¹ Andreas Krase, 'Archive of Visions-Inventory of Things Eugène Atget's Paris', in *Paris Eugène Atget 1857-1927* (Taschen, 2000), 90.

⁶² See *Boutique automobile, avenue de la Grande-Armée, 1924-1925* in *Atget Paris* (California: Gingko Press, 1992), 724.



1.9 Eugene Atget, *Marché des Carmes, Place Maubert, 1911.*

orthopaedic medicine. [See Image 1.10] The shop window is cluttered with medical supplies of all kinds, where they are displayed in a striking manner with the aid of store window dummies. Fragmented body parts are positioned to display various support belts for the back and pelvis, as well as shin sleeves and ankle wraps. While to promote merchandise of a smaller size, dispersed amongst this impressive arrangement are miniature torsos to simulate children's bodies, producing in this way an even greater overall uncanny effect. The shop front attracts attention by reason of being extraordinary, peculiar, and even verging on the grotesque.

The final subject that is presented here from two different angles, "Hairdresser" (*Coiffuer, Avenue de l'Observatoire 14^e arr., 1926*) shares much

of the dramatic qualities of the chemist's shop. [See Image 1.11] All of the window shop dummies, both fragmented as well as whole, are no longer headless but are now attached to hollow faces and are expressive of gestures conveying wry humour. Bashfulness is evoked through the folded arms of the



1.10 Eugene Atget, *Boutique (Shop)*, Boulevard de Strasbourg, 10^e arr., 1921.

female bust on the left at the moment that the right wears a vacant smile, while the central dummy sits musing against the cityscape reflected in the window. It was precisely these sorts of qualities of “extraordinariness” that drew the attention of Man Ray and his fellow Surrealists, who in fact purchased these images directly from Atget along with numerous others to enrich his collection.⁶³

Yet the extraordinariness that gave these images their modern appeal, and

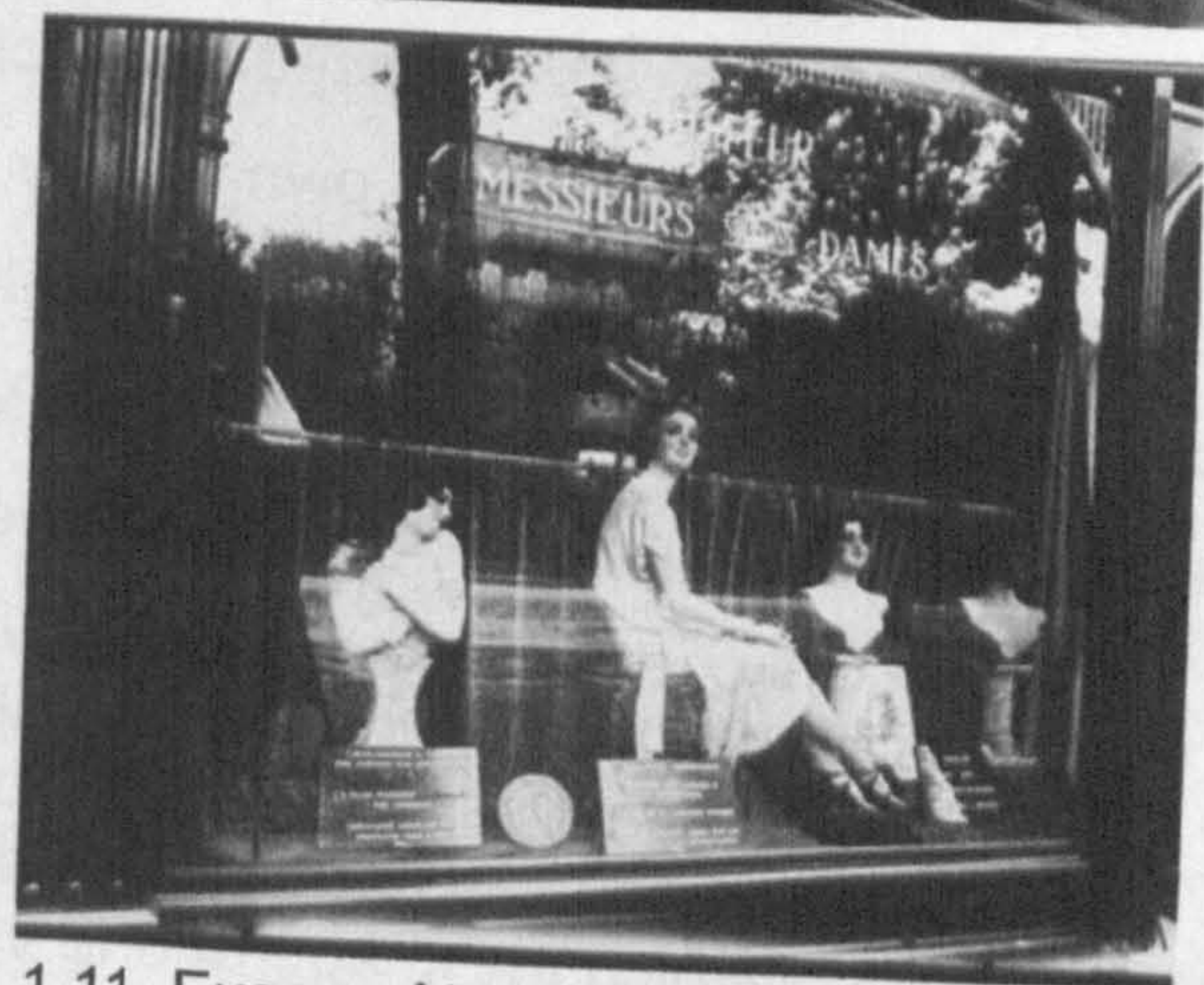
continues to do so to this day, is a consequence of a much deeper motive than their aesthetic reveals. The photographs comprise a commentary about

⁶³ Both *Shop, Boulevard de Strasbourg* as well as the image of *Hairdresser, Avenue de l'Observatoire* (pictured on the lower right) comprise prints from the ex-collection of Man Ray, acquired in the form of museum purchases by The George Eastman House, Still Photograph Archive. Man Ray himself sold these photographs along with others, comprising a total of 47 prints between 1954-1956. “Eugène Atget, 494 photographs”, *George Eastman House*, <http://www.geh.org/fm/atget/htmlsrc/atget-intro.html>, (accessed January 2009).

how the social element, that is to say, the real people who actually exist behind the production and retail of commodities, have actually disappeared. Unlike the earlier images of the street trader peddling a statue or the shoemaker displaying his shoes, these particular photographs make reference to merchandise that has in effect overshadowed the people responsible for its creation or distribution, and is now autonomously floating free, virtually leading a life of its own. Even though this is an exaggeration that may seem to parallel the fantasies of science fiction, any measure of its truth, however slight, is nonetheless uneasy and one that remains starkly contemporary.⁶⁴

If it could be said that Atget's struggle with modernity has brought about his most creative work, it is worth taking a look at the strikingly similar manner in which the advocates of Atget's work, the younger generation members of the avant-garde represented here by the writing of Walter Benjamin, viewed these identical themes:

⁶⁴ See also a similar commentary made by Kruse, who describes how consumer goods have taken the place of humanity and appear to lead a life all of their own. Andreas Kruse, 'Archive of Visions-Inventory of Things Eugène Atget's Paris', in *Paris Eugène Atget 1857-1927* (Taschen, 2000), 90.



1.11 Eugene Atget, *Coiffeur (Hairdresser)* Avenue de l'Observatoire 14^e arr., 1926.

In the crowded arcades of the boulevards, as in the semi-deserted arcades of the old Rue Saint-Denis, umbrellas and canes are displayed in serried ranks: a phalanx of colourful crooks. Many are the institutes of hygiene, where gladiators are wearing orthopaedic belts and bandages wind round the white bellies of mannequins. In the windows of the hairdressers, one sees the last women with long hair; they sport richly undulating masses, petrified coiffures. How brittle appears the stonework of the walls beside them and above: crumbling papier-maché!⁶⁵

Serried merchandise, mannequins, and the appearance of petrified coiffures all comprise a futuristic account of the reality found in the boulevards. Portrayed in a vivid tone and with an abundance of phantasmagorical elements, it is not difficult to see how Atget's images, particularly his late work, resonated well within the Surrealist impulse for abstraction. The main difference between Atget and the avant-garde however, was with the uninhibited, light-hearted manner with which they viewed reality itself as a thing to be explored. As a consequence of the impact of Modernity, the Surrealists responded in their own way by venturing into appropriating reality, rather than trying to document it. Life itself begins to have the look and feel of science fiction, where the rupture of time together with its constituent parts of past, present and future is conceived to be a fertile object of investigation:

Torso. – Only he who can view his own past as an abortion sprung from compulsion and need can use it to full advantage in the present. For what one has lived is at best comparable to a beautiful statue which has had all its limbs knocked off in transit, and now yields nothing but the precious block out of which the image of one's future must be hewn.⁶⁶

The metropolis as a site of proliferating production and consumption of commodities as well as the spectacle of their display comprises the

⁶⁵ Walter Benjamin, excerpt from 'Arcades', a brief essay from 1927. The translators note that the text is probably written in collaboration with Franz Hessel at the time that Benjamin and Hessel had intended to write a newspaper article on the Paris arcades. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 872.

⁶⁶ Walter Benjamin, 'Torso', (comprising an excerpt of 'Enlargements') in *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London, New York: Verso, 2006), 76. The idea of the past disclosing the future is to be a key concept in Benjamin's "historic gaze". In this passage, through the statue of a torso Benjamin is referring to the unmindful adult and illustrates the importance of redeeming one's own history, that is, the experience of remembering one's own past, which is childhood.

phantasmagoria of modernity. What remains to be examined is Benjamin's own position towards modernity and his engagement with Surrealist motifs.

The experience of the modern that Atget often preferred not to show in his photographs is to produce its own intoxication (a dreamscape), which yields a particular appeal for the avant-garde in the late 1920's. Benjamin writes in his Surrealist essay in 1929:

In the world's structure dream loosens individuality like a bad tooth. This loosening of the self by intoxication is, at the same time, precisely the fruitful, living experience that allowed these people [the Surrealists] to step outside the domain of intoxication. This is not the place to give an exact definition of Surrealist experience. But anyone who has perceived that the writings of this circle are not literature but something else – demonstrations, watchwords, documents, bluffs, forgeries if you will, but at any rate not literature – will also know, for the same reason, that the writings are concerned literally with experiences, not with theories and still less with phantasms.⁶⁷

Surrealist writing is to be concerned foremost with the communicability of real experience, and not mere illusion. Through the act of dreaming, the instincts of human desire are laid bare. Benjamin had hopes that the raw experience conveyed through the trope of dreams could potentially transcend individual subjectivity in order to productively communicate a shared, collective experience. Most importantly, despite the fanciful tone in much of Benjamin's own writing about Paris, that is, the temper of reality as an enthralling futuristic experience, it is in fact, not intended to be celebratory. For equally important to losing oneself in a dream, lays the imperative act of stepping back or withdrawing from the domain of its intoxication. It is not only the means by which to render real experience, but is also to become a method for facilitating

⁶⁷ Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' in *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London, New York: Verso, 2006), 227.

critical analysis and historic awakening.⁶⁸ In his book *Myth and Metropolis*, sociologist Graeme Gilloch sheds light on Benjamin's personal struggle with Modernity, whereby his strategy for expressing "the disenchantment of the world is to take place paradoxically and precisely through enchantment."⁶⁹ According to Gilloch, one of the tasks Benjamin sets out for himself is to dispel the mythic forces of modernity, by way of critically focusing on the commodity and its fetishization within the broader world of consumer capitalism.

Modernity is to disenchant both Atget and Benjamin, but unlike Atget who simply avoids showing the modern world, Benjamin on the other hand unflinchingly immerses himself completely within it. Benjamin's tactic is to orchestrate something of a rude awakening. He is to become engrossed, at times seemingly lost, and allows himself to become deeply marked by the modern world in order to comprehend it, to unmask it and to reveal its disenchantment to others. To dispel myth is to acknowledge the misrepresentation of truth in all instances. For Benjamin, to understand the modern world entails not only acknowledging its maelstrom, that is, the existence of ongoing suffering, but also calls for scepticism and grave

⁶⁸ In Benjamin's writing, one may detect latent misgivings towards the Surrealist aesthetic. Benjamin clearly objects to allow prolonged "strangeness", the hallmark of the Surrealist's gaze, to be employed as an end in itself. This is reflected in his Surrealist essay where he claims: "For the histrionic or fanatical stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious takes us no further..." (Ibid., 237) One may compare this to the more iconoclastic stance of Man Ray, who in 1934, when Benjamin was already looking in the direction of documents and historiography to find collective experience, Ray was still celebrating the ambiguous qualities created by the "automatism" of the mechanical image by the camera, openly embracing them in order to effectively expose human desire and the subconscious self: "The removal of inculcated modes of presentation, resulting in apparent artificiality or strangeness is a confirmation of the free functioning of this automatism, and is to be welcomed." Man Ray, 'The Age of Light,' in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 168.

⁶⁹ Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 109. Gilloch broadly defines "myth" when he writes, "The intoxication of modernity is itself part of the mythic character of the metropolis and finds its final embodiment in the unchanging parade of commodities and fashions, in repetition and compulsion." Ibid., 172.

reservations concerning the doctrine of progress.⁷⁰ To be sure, through commodities, Modernity's self-proclaimed solutions for continual improvement, itself propagate the persistence of myth. What's more, the sense of temporal discontinuity that was pervasively and invariably rupturing tradition, was everywhere masked as *historical progress*. "In its denial of the persistence of myth," Gilloch claims, "historicism itself participates in the phantasmagoria of modernity."⁷¹ Ultimately, Benjamin is to look beyond the Surrealist dreamscape, skilfully weaving alternative tropes of "sleeping" and "awakening" into a broad, historical view of the world. "Capitalism was a natural phenomenon with which a new dream-filled sleep came over Europe," Benjamin writes in his *Arcades Project*, "and, through it, a reactivation of mythic forces."⁷² Benjamin fundamentally sees the modern era as a time of sleeping, during which consumer capitalism not only hinders our understanding of the time in which we live, but continuously and deceptively succumbs us to a promising new world to come. To dispel the myth, dreaming is to become actively bound with the act of awakening, and with it, historical recognition.⁷³ By the early 1930's, it becomes clear for Benjamin

⁷⁰ In 1937 Benjamin is to cite from Victor Hugo's *William Shakespeare*: "Progress is God's very footstep" he notes, responding thus: "Universal suffrage is the cosmic clock by which the pace of that step is measured." Walter Benjamin, 'Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian,' in *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London, New York: Verso, 2006), 370.

⁷¹ Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 107. In the name of "historical progress", one cannot resist making the connection to the magnitude of what was sacrificed for Haussman's renovation of Paris. In this light, the misrecognition of truth and historicism's participation in "myth" or the "phantasmagoria of modernity" may help to explain why Atget's sober documentation of Old Paris generally seemed to subvert and often disrupt the idealised view of the way many of Atget's clients preferred to envision the historic part of city.

⁷² Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 391.

⁷³ Benjamin makes this specific connection when he expresses the objectives framing his own work. Benjamin coins *The Arcades Project* as being, "an attempt at the technique of awakening ... an awakening from the 19th century." Cited in Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 110. In addition, Benjamin writes further in *The Arcades Project*: "Just as Proust begins the story of his life with an awakening, so must every presentation of history begin with an awakening; in fact, it should treat of nothing else. This one, accordingly, deals with awakening from the nineteenth century." Walter Benjamin, 'Convolute N: On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress,' in *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 464 (N4,3).

that the critical act of unmasking exhorts a waking up from the dream. It is a stance he adopts as a reaction against the celebratory tendencies of the Surrealists, and is to be further utilised for Benjamin's sober and more critical historical gaze.

The Document

Many have succumbed to envision Atget as a Surrealist photographer. After all, he was to be notoriously hailed as a precursor to Surrealist photography in 1931 by Benjamin himself.⁷⁴ However, I would like to argue that Benjamin's praise for Atget in addition to the genuine fondness for his work derive more precisely from his preoccupation with historiography. I have explored how Benjamin turns away from Surrealist motifs in order to seek more effective ways of penetrating reality, and to focus on his work about Modernity as a shared, collective, historical condition of his time. In this chapter, I would like to introduce Benjamin's claims in connection to the aesthetic radicalism of the document, and to argue that capitalism's overall destructive effect on culture prompted a greater need in both Benjamin as well as Atget to expose alternative social and historical truths about modern life in the city and society at large. First I will take a final look at the impact of modernization in Paris by incorporating Atget's photographic documents into the broader market forces dominating the reception of his work. I will then outline Benjamin's key criticisms regarding the effects of capitalism on society, and suggest a link between the visualities of Atget's imaging of Paris and Benjamin's *Arcades Project* with respect to the use of the document for producing a critical image of everyday modern life.

⁷⁴ See Walter Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography', in *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London, New York: Verso, 2006), 249.

By the year of his death in 1927, Atget had left behind an archive comprising thousands of images, which except to his clients and a few individuals of the avant-garde, was relatively unknown to the world at large. Today he is commended a place in the history of photography for his comprehensive documentary practice. Despite the passing of an entire century separating Atget's time from the present, Atget scholarship has delineated the ways in which he actually managed the huge body of work: his business practices, accounts of his working methods as well as the system for the organization and classification of his images, giving us a clearer picture of his practice with regard to historical accuracy. In the recent Atget Retrospective organized by the Bibliothèque Nationale marking the 150 years from his birth, Atget's archive was given due importance as a structured and coherent body of work that was subdivided into various series, which he added to as time went on. Under the heading *Eugène Atget, photographer and archaeologist*, the wall text in the exhibition stated how, "Like a historian Atget defined his motifs and created novel typologies, turning apparently insignificant objects into historical subjects."⁷⁵ I intend to follow this line of thought. Such a perspective encourages a genuine appreciation of the rigorousness and complexity in Atget's work. Within this recent and sophisticated view, Atget is represented not simply as a prominent artist, for his stature as such has long been ensured. But preferably, we are guided into seeing the artistry behind his perception. To credit Atget with a role of an archeologist or historiographer signifies an endeavor to confront as well as engage with the repercussions of time.

It may be said that both the archeologist and historian try to make sense of the past: the former dealing with ruins and the latter with evidence or facts of all kinds. In piecing together fragments, both the archeologist and historian are obliged to deal with the intricacies and ravages of time itself, and to

⁷⁵ Eugène Atget – Retrospective, Martin-Gropius-Bau Berlin, 28 September 2007 to 6 January 2008. See Antonia Bardis, 'Exhibition Review: Eugène Atget Retrospective', *Photography and Culture*, (Volume 2, Issue 1, March 2009): 97.

inevitably recognize that there is not one authoritative time but a time for all things. For Atget, it is likely that he confronted these ravages more than once, through his endeavor to document each endangered subject before it passed into oblivion.⁷⁶ In this light, Atget did not have much reason to take photographs of the various phantasmagoric subjects such as the Eiffel Tower, for it was clear from the present state of affairs that objects such as these would secure a place in the memory of the collective for a long time to come. Images of this sort were under no jeopardy of being forgotten. On the other hand Atget recognized, at least consciously towards the end of life, how his

⁷⁶ Evidence shows that in several instances, Atget was concerned with literally “saving” objects through his photographic documentation. Julien Levy has written a recollection of his visit to Atget the year before his death along with Bernice Abbott: “He collected an archive of classified documents, at first to no particular end, he [Atget] explained. Until the collection over years ... became a record of aspects of a Paris that were slowly to vanish.” Cited in Molly Nesbit, *Atget's Seven Albums* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1994), 217: note 40. In another example, historian Ian Walker calls attention to the fourth photograph to be published in *La Revolution Surrealiste*, an image which was also simultaneously used for Atget's own album: *L'Art dans le vieux Paris*. Depicting an elaborate railing of a staircase, Atget's original title and accompanying text of the image reads: “Hotel de Marquis de Mascarini (disappeared). Splendid extension, wrought iron, of the Hotel staircase”. This text, incorporating modifiers like the words “disappeared” and “splendid” is telling of Atget's own concerns that were quite different from the editors of *La Revolution Surrealiste*, which is precisely Walker's point. See, Ian Walker, *City Gorged With Dreams: Surrealism and Documentary Photography in Interwar Paris*, (Manchester University Press, 2002), 92. Finally and more recently, Françoise Reynaud, curator at the Musée Carnavalet has illustrated as such when she reveals Atget's annotation on the rear side of one of his architectural photographs in the documentary series, *The Genius of Photography*. Holding up the image to the camera she claims, “He took the picture... because this place was going to be destroyed,” Reynaud then turns it over and comments: “It's not often that he writes things like that on the back of his pictures, but here it is written, ‘is going to disappear’”. See *The Genius of Photography*, Episode 2, (BBC, 2008): 25:20.

pictures would outlive their subjects and become remembered reality.⁷⁷ In the mind of the individual, a forgotten object is equivalent to a distant object. For all that, Atget's imagery yields to the bare presence of every single one of his subjects. "In an Atget photograph," the historian Beaumont Newhall has written, "every detail stands forth with a clarity that is remarkable."⁷⁸ It is in this way that his subjects achieve immediacy. By virtue of his documentation, Atget's subjects come to life, ultimately drawing them closer and within intimate reach. In a letter dated 1920 from Atget to Paul Léon, the Director of Fine Arts at the Museum of Historical Monuments in Paris, we find one of the few surviving statements framing his work. Atget demonstrates how his photographic collection possesses a unique power. By cutting through lost time, remarkably, his photographs of antiquated subjects provide an unmediated access to the subject itself:

Over the past twenty years, through my work and on my own initiative, I have collected artistic documents of the fine sixteenth to nineteenth century architecture in all the ancient streets of old Paris in the form of photographic plates in format 18cm. x 24cm.: old hotels, historical and curious houses, fine facades and doors, panellings, door-knockers, old fountains, period stairs (wood and wrought-iron), and interiors of all the churches in Paris (overall views and details), including Notre-Dame, (...)

⁷⁷ I am specifically thinking here of the work Atget thought to produce for the various historic libraries along with their potential impact on the prospective modern viewer. Presumably Atget's aspiration was that his subjects, recorded for posterity by his camera would at least be ensured to endure through time by means of his photographic documents. Comparably Molly Nesbit, who takes a much bolder position with her argument for politicising Atget's work, has also speculated about the intent of Atget's work in the albums specifically produced for the Bibliothèque Nationale. According to Nesbit, the working class neighbourhoods pictured in Atget's documents intentionally subvert the aesthetic gaze of the bourgeois viewer in the print room where the albums can be seen. See Molly Nesbit, 'The Use of History,' *Art in America*, vol. 74 (February 1986), 79. In any case, I think it is suffice to say that the issue of memory or remembrance provided the original impetus for this particular and significant part of Atget's archive: the work that was specifically designed for the various historic libraries.

⁷⁸ Beaumont has claimed: "Among the thousands of photographs Atget took, there are those that reach beyond the record and approach the lyric, for he had a remarkable vision. He could find a human quality where no human being appears." Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography From 1839 to the Present*, (London: Secker & Warburg, 1982), 195.

etc. This huge artistic and documentary collection is now completed, and I can truthfully say that I possess the whole of old Paris.⁷⁹

In order to boast the comprehensiveness of his project, Atget's conviction "to possess" the city in its entirety may only have been, in the manner of speaking, a marked attempt to negotiate a final sale. Even as such however, and considering the measure of urban redevelopment in his time, it attests to the fact that he had managed to preserve with his camera, what no longer existed. It follows from this that the function of Atget's document was twofold: not only did it aim to describe its subject technically, but also, inevitably with the passing of time, was literally destined to replace it. For that reason it is not an oversimplification to say that in retrospect, a constituting part of Atget's photographic practice was to capture the presence of subjects before they were subject to destruction or ruination. The Bibliothèque Nationale's claim is relevant here: Eugène Atget was indeed both "photographer and archaeologist". Atget could very well have claimed himself to be an archeologist of pre-modern times. A closer look at the actual tasks to which the work of an archeologist corresponds may help to put Atget's photographic practice into better perspective:

The urban archeologist is engaged in a race against time, a frantic act of rescue before the site is given over to the prevailing interests of builders and developers. The imminent danger of destruction by contemporary powers animates and gives a sense of urgency to the activity of the urban archaeologist, who must salvage all he or she can before the site vanishes without a trace.⁸⁰

Atget's photography was implicated in a race against time. However the demolition of architecture was not the only way that a rupture from the past - the distinctive feature characterising the impact of the modern era - was to be

⁷⁹ Cited in Ian Jeffrey, *Photography: A Concise History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1981), 139.

⁸⁰ Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 72. Gilloch has used the example of the urban archeologist to illustrate the desperate quality in Benjamin's own work to rescue the past. For Benjamin, remembrance was the impetus for revolutionary action, precisely because all the utopian impulses and aspirations of the past generations were incarnated and preserved by memory and tradition.

experienced. The ways in which capitalism's forces of production were accelerating ruination are made explicit if we look at the reception of Atget's work.

As a modern entrepreneur, Atget was undoubtedly aware of how his photographic documents could become a valuable new source of reference. Working at the heels of change at the turn of the century, the ruinous effects on the historic parts of the city were becoming increasingly apparent. Accordingly, the past was not only subject to a general concern for being preserved, but also, it was considered a subject of inspiration or potential influence. That is to say, the dead matter of the past was not lifeless, but rather, through the market forces of the day, it moved and fluctuated along varying degrees of appropriation and exploitation. To be sure, Old Paris was to become fashionably recreated a thousand times over in Atget's time. Whether the point of issue was an object's distinction, that is, a subject valued for the intricacies of its appearance and thus retrievable by the design sector that was made to matter, or the fact of an architectural subject's extinction by the various historic libraries of the state, in Atget's time, the people who invested in his photographic documents did so in line with an apparent interest in the past and with regard to a particular purpose.⁸¹ In the era of incipient high capitalism however, and this is a crucial point that Benjamin and the Surrealists understood well: the impact of time was notorious for reducing the life-span of the objects in the material world, by way of casting them obsolete. It was not just the antiquated subjects that were up to then admired for their idealistic aesthetic qualities, but the outmoded objects of the more

⁸¹ This has been precisely Molly Nesbit's point. In her chapter 'The Document' she claims: "...in the late nineteenth century the document was fast becoming something more than a preparatory step for buildings, paintings, and ornamental details. Whether drawn or photographed, the document was playing an increasingly important role in the elaboration of scientific and historical proof. ...It held knowledge that in turn would be used to produce more knowledge, usually in a more advanced state. So a document of Vieux Paris would inform an antiquarian's account of a seventeenth-century political event; a document of a lampshade salesman might inform a genre painting meant for Salon exhibition." See Molly Nesbit, *Atget's Seven Albums* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1994), 16.

recent past, including those found in the marginal details of Atget's photographs, which was more the subject of attention.⁸² What the Surrealists recognized, and this is perhaps what was to inspire Benjamin the most, was that Modernity was in fact subjecting to ruination, incrementally, ever more smaller parcels of time. "Here for the first time," Benjamin is to write of history in the following years to come, "the recent past becomes *distant* past" (emphasis original).⁸³ By means of a keen optic, the Surrealists began to distinguish a difference in appearance between their own time and the experience of the immediate past. Benjamin writes in his Surrealism essay:

He [Breton] was the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the "outmoded", in the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, the objects that have begun to be extinct, grand pianos, the dresses of five years ago, fashionable restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them.⁸⁴

To experience Modernity at the turn of the century was in effect, to encounter a rupture from the past by the agency of obsolescence. What the Surrealists noticed was that the acceleration of time was manifested in a bewildering array of fashionable objects, which were rapidly rendered out of date. Virtually, the new immediately appeared old. What's more, within this slippery realm of oscillating time, the old appeared as new precisely because the past had

⁸² Ian Walker attributes the general appeal of Atget's photographs published in *La Revolution Surrealiste* precisely to the appearance of the outmoded. In reference to the first photograph at the Place de la Bastille, which depicted a crowd watching a solar eclipse in 1912, together with the three other images that were subsequently published, it was not only their subject matter, Walker claims (19th century ironwork or the display of corsets) but also "the patina of slight out-of-dateness" evident in the fourteen year gap between the time the pictures were shot and the time in which they were viewed. Walker sees this out-of-dateness manifest in "the clothes worn by the crowd as well as in the photographic technology that Atget persisted in using." See, Ian Walker, *City Gorged With Dreams: Surrealism and Documentary Photography in Interwar Paris*, (Manchester University Press, 2002), 95.

⁸³ What is important here is that Benjamin transforms the temporal difference between present and recent past into a spatial distance: "Here for the first time, the recent past becomes *distant* past. Primal history forms part of the recent past, just as mountains, seen from the great distance, appear to form part of the landscape lying before them." See the earliest preserved draft of 'Expose of 1935', in *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 898.

⁸⁴ Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' in *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London, New York: Verso, 2006), 229.

been forgotten. "At what tempo did changes in fashion take place in earlier times?" Benjamin writes in the early sketches of the "Paris Arcades I" in 1927.⁸⁵ Through fashion, Benjamin is to separate Modernity from earlier times not only in terms of a spatial distance, but also as having a distinct tempo of its own. Time in Modernity is to move at an increasingly rapid pace, to be sure, however in Benjamin's description, the repercussions of this time are marked neither by ruination nor obsolescence. In fact, Modernity is not distinguished by transition or change of any kind. Benjamin's grim depiction is relatively more cunning and much more distressing. As it turns out, the time of Modernity follows a monotonous course: it is a repetitious and tortuous time during which nothing but an endless manifestation of "newness" prevails. For Benjamin, the time of Modernity is nothing short of stasis, it is the time of hell:

The punishments of hell are always the newest thing going in this domain. What is at issue is not that 'the same thing happens over and over' (much less is it a question here of eternal return), but rather that the face of the world, the colossal head, precisely in what is newest never alters – that this 'newest' remains, in every respect, the same.

⁸⁵ This particular citation consists of a single passage where its subject is not bound with any other preceding or subsequent text. Such is the nature of most of the material from the Early Sketches, which was written by Benjamin from mid-1927 to early 1930 in a bound notebook that contained various other notes and drafts. See Walter Benjamin, 'First Sketches, Paris Arcades < I >', in *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 837 (E°, 47). Moreover, it is presumed that in all likelihood, Benjamin drew his inspiration from the sociologist Georg Simmel, who in his 1904 essay on the subject of fashion claimed that it "repeatedly returns to old forms...and the course of fashion has been likened to a circle". Cited in Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 121.

This constitutes the eternity of hell and the sadist's delight in innovation.⁸⁶

The commodity consumes experience through a false consciousness of novelty. It comprises a dream from which we must urgently, each wake up. According to Benjamin, to withstand the intoxication of consumer culture was nothing short of a political praxis. This may seem extreme to us now, but it may help to understand that both Benjamin as well as Atget were living in a time in which the goods being bought and sold, along with the culmination of all that was considered merchandise, had not long ago become the product of factory standardisation and mass production. Technological advancements prompted the advent of new machines, which together with new materials gave rise to new production methods and construction. Products could now be produced in enormous quantities. Even the prominent branches of creative activity: the Arts, both applied as well as fine, had forged through the

⁸⁶ Walter Benjamin, 'First Sketches, Paris Arcades< I >', in *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 842, (G°, 17). It is important here to trace how through the novelty and charm of fashionable objects, Benjamin was convinced that the commodity had come to dominate the world in which he lived. By observing market forces, he noticed a profusion of discarded objects: products that had only recently had been considered popular or useful immediately transform into detritus by the architects of fashion. Benjamin attributed the vastly growing number of unwanted objects laconically to the "bad conscience of producers", as illustrated here by his epigrammatic notation on kitsch: "Kitsch. Its economic analysis. In what way is manifest here: the overproduction of commodities; the bad conscience of producers." Ibid., 865, (P°, 7). Benjamin maintained that, "What is 'always the same thing' is not the event but the newness of the event, the shock with which it eventuates." 'First Sketches, Paris Arcades< I >', Ibid., 868, (Q°, 23). Furthermore, in his 'Expose of 1935', Benjamin sees how market forces were penetrating into all branches of creative activity and social life. He repeats how time and again, in the face of novelty, the modern consumer is subjected to an attitude of pure reaction: "Newness is a quality independent of the use value of the commodity. ... This semblance of the new is reflected, like one mirror in another, in the semblance of the ever recurrent. The product of this reflection is the phantasmagoria of 'cultural history', in which the bourgeoisie enjoys its false, consciousness to the full." See 'Expose of 1935', Ibid., 11. By the time of his final Expose of 1939, Benjamin adopts a more solemn tone. Influenced by the despairing writings of the great revolutionary Blanqui at that time in his cell, he responds with fervour to the mythic character of the commodity, its false notion of progress, and the failure of humanity to alleviate social injustice: "The century was incapable of responding to the new technological possibilities with a new social order. That is why the last word was left to the errant negotiators between old and new who are at the heart of these phantasmagorias. The world dominated by its phantasmagorias – this, to make use of Baudelaire's term, is 'modernity'." 'Expose of 1939', Ibid., 26.

market as commodities and where fully fledged into becoming unconditionally appropriated and commercialised.⁸⁷ Susceptible to popular trends in production and marketing, as well as propaganda, the current state of affairs called for nothing other than a sustained and organised political struggle; a type of activism that for the avant-garde was a signal for politicised looking. Perhaps it is the writer Susan Sontag who has best described the desperate mood of Paris at the turn of the century: the epoch that both Atget and Benjamin shared. Benjamin, she wrote, felt "he was living in a time in which everything valuable was the last of its kind."⁸⁸ For Benjamin, skepticism, physiognomic reading and the penetration of reality were the order of the day. What is at issue is not only to detect how things repeat themselves to no avail but also to understand how within Modernity, in the face of appearances, things never really change. Consumer capitalism hoaxes expectations, proposes a false consciousness of progress and abundance, and virtually does away with memory. Ultimately, it distorts the understanding of the time in which we live in a fundamental way:

The dreaming collective knows no history. Events pass before it as always identical and always new. The sensation of the newest and most

⁸⁷ Benjamin writes of his previous century: "In the nineteenth century, this development of the forces of production worked to emancipate the forms of construction from art, just as in the sixteenth century the sciences freed themselves from philosophy. A start is made with architecture as engineered construction. Then comes the reproduction of nature as photography. The creation of fantasy prepares to become practical as commercial art. Literature submits to montage in the feuilleton. All of these products are on the point of entering the market as commodities." Walter Benjamin, 'Expose of 1935, Early Version': Ibid., 898.

⁸⁸ Susan Sontag, Introduction to *One Way Street and Other Writings* by Walter Benjamin, (London, New York: Verso, 2006), 27. Sontag has tried to illustrate Benjamin's disenchantment with Modernity together with his urgency for an appropriate and unremitting criticism of the time in which he lived. Sontag calls attention to the poignant title Benjamin had deliberately chosen for his Surrealism essay ('The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia') and writes: "Benjamin thought the freelance intellectual was a dying species anyway, made no less obsolete by capitalist society than by revolutionary communism; indeed he felt that he was living in a time in which everything valuable was the last of its kind. He thought Surrealism was the last intelligent moment of the European intelligentsia, an appropriately destructive, nihilistic kind of intelligence." Ibid., 27.

modern is, in fact, as much as a dream formation of events as the 'eternal return of the same'.⁸⁹

Benjamin wanted to transcend individual experience from within the realm of dreams, in order to critically focus on consumer capitalism as a shared, collective, historical condition. This is the crucial point separating Benjamin from the Surrealists. For the Surrealists, the previous century was embedded in a world of material things, both unfamiliar as well as stimulating, although more often than not, simply mysterious, that was the stock from which the Surrealist dreamscape was being constructed. Benjamin however was not content with the reality proposed by dreams. Devoid of real experience and

⁸⁹ Walter Benjamin, 'First Sketches, Paris Arcades< I >', in *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 854, (M°, 14). Most likely, Benjamin initially formulated the idea of the "dreaming collective" from his preoccupation with psychoanalysis. In the following passage, Benjamin utilises the motifs of "sleeping" and "waking" that are rooted in individual experience and expands them to encompass more people, in order to critically speak of the oppressive nature of interior décor in his time: "It is one of the suppositions of psychoanalysis that a clear-cut distinction between sleeping and waking has no value for the human being... but yields before an unending variety of conscious states determined, in each case by the level of wakefulness of all psychic and corporeal centres. This thoroughly fluctuating situation of a consciousness each time manifoldly divided between waking and sleeping has to be transferred from the individual to the collective. Once this is done, it becomes clear that, for the nineteenth century, houses are the dream configurations of its deepest level of sleep." 'First Sketches, Paris Arcades< I >', *Ibid.*, 844, (G°, 27). Benjamin's visuality was inspired from a variety of sources. It is not clear at what point he infused politics with psychoanalysis, but the next two passages, which form the epistemological core of *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin distinguishes "the dreaming collective" into matters of class distinction: "Didn't Marx teach that the bourgeoisie, as class, can never arrive at a perfectly clear awareness of itself? And if this is the case, isn't one justified in annexing to Marx's thesis the idea of the dream collective (that is, the bourgeois collective)?" 'First Sketches, Paris Arcades< I >', *Ibid.*, 863, (O°, 67). And the immediately subsequent text: "Wouldn't it be possible, furthermore, to show how the whole set of issues with which this project is concerned is illuminated in the process of the proletariat's becoming conscious of itself?" 'First Sketches, Paris Arcades < I >', *Ibid.*, 863, (O°, 68).

impervious to reason or critical analysis, the Surrealist dreamscape as motif was destined to fall into abstraction.⁹⁰

The city engulfed in mystery is foremost impenetrable and obscure, whereas Benjamin endeavored to bring things closer. Benjamin wanted to bring things near to us *spatially*. “The true method of making things present”, he wrote for his first sketches on the Paris Arcades:

is to represent them in our space (not to represent ourselves in their space). ... Thus represented, the things allow no mediating construction from out of ‘large contexts’. – It is, in essence, the same with the aspect of great things from the past – the cathedral of Chartres, the temple of Paestrum: to receive them into our space (not to feel empathy with their

⁹⁰ Gilloch claims, “For Benjamin, the intoxication of the city must not be allowed to befuddle the senses or hinder critical engagement. Benjamin does not adopt Aragon’s stimulating vision of the metropolis, but rather employs it as a counterpoint to his own more sober, and more melancholy, historical gaze.” In the 1930’s Benjamin is to gradually withdrawal from Surrealist influence and is to become inspired by Proust’s “memoire involontaire” and later by the allegorical poetics of Baudelaire. Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 95. Moreover, I would like to note here that Benjamin was not interested in the rendering of personal feelings, reactions or matters of taste, which did not in some way contribute to a critical understanding of society. Benjamin’s ambivalence towards the Surrealist dreamscape lie precisely in the subjective manner to which the motif of “dreaming” was employed. This becomes apparent by tracing his criticism towards Aragon’s *Paysan de Paris*: With Aragon, Benjamin claimed, one gets “lulled, through exhaustion, into ‘dream’ or ‘mythology’”. Ibid., 908. Benjamin criticised Aragon for presenting nothing but a “physiology” of the city of Paris “that could not be more mysterious or more dead.” Ibid., 883. By this criticism, Benjamin meant that Aragon’s rendering of the city and its past remained detached from reality, impervious to historical awareness, and thus restricted to a romantic distance. In contrast, Benjamin’s motif of “awakening” was aimed to transcend the shortsightedness of individual experience in order to penetrate the realities of a collectively shared experience: “...whereas Aragon persists within the realm of dream,” Benjamin writes, “here the concern is to find the constellation of awakening. While in Aragon there remains an impressionistic element, namely the ‘mythology’, here it is a question of the dissolution of ‘mythology’ into the space of history.” Ibid., 845. For an excellent analysis of the differences separating Benjamin from the Surrealists, see Rolf Tiedemann, the editor for the German edition of *The Arcades Project* (introductory essay to the German edition of *The Arcades Project*), ‘Dialects at a Standstill: Approaches to the Passengen-Werk’, in *The Arcades Project*, Ibid., 934.

builders or their priests). We don't displace our being into theirs: they step into our life.⁹¹

In many instances, this is the approach Atget himself had selected when he set out to represent Old Paris in his photographs. Whenever he photographed a picturesque alley, street, or intersection, Atget allowed his camera just the right amount of distance within the surrounding space to incorporate the crude appearance of carts, baskets or posters, which were all permitted a rightful place. Coexisting with ancient architecture, many of his photographs openly allowed for transitory subjects such as children and stray dogs. Admittedly, Atget was generally tolerant of contingency as well as careless of the disruptions caused by the miscellany of modern urban life, as a matter of policy.⁹² But in doing so he was neither a primitive nor naïve. Similar to the skilful work of an "editor", together with his distinct taste for montage, every time Atget pressed the shutter of his camera he knew exactly the sort of picture he was making. By "allowing traces of later historical time to appear", as Nesbit has expressed it, and by obliging his Vieux Paris clients to frequently crop or retouch modern life out of the frame of his photographs, Atget was inevitably avoiding a timeless view of cultural artefacts and preventing a sterilised view of the past, in addition to disrupting any moralising

⁹¹ Benjamin here is actually referring to the writing style of the "anecdote". Its increasing popularity and informal tone had appealed to Benjamin as an alternative construction of history: "The anecdote brings things near to us spatially, lets them enter our life. It represents the strict antithesis to the sort of history which demands 'empathy', which makes everything abstract." Benjamin is opposed to the classic historical narrative, which is structured on emotional response. He rejected any reconstruction of history designed with the imperative to understand and share the feelings of others. Any attempt to grasp the slightest understanding of the past becomes a difficult task, burdens the reader into treading expansive distances and obliges him or her to identify with the long gone figures of former times. He ends this passage by writing: "This pathos of nearness, the hatred of the abstract configuration of human life in epochs, has animated the great sceptics." Walter Benjamin, 'First Sketches, Paris Arcades < I >', *Ibid.*, 846 (I°, 2). Writing elsewhere in his 'First Sketches', Benjamin ultimately criticises historical empathy with an element of sarcasm: "The history that was bent on showing things 'as they really and truly were' was the strongest narcotic of the nineteenth century". *Ibid.*, 863 (O°, 71).

⁹² "As Maria Morris Hambourg has written, "Atget's special talent was to fix his frame to focus attention upon the motif without removing it from the context of lived experience." Cited in Gerry Badger, *Eugène Atget* 55, (New York, London: Phaidon Press, 2001), 24.

and nationalistic attitudes of the French cultural heritage from being fashioned.⁹³ As it is well known, Atget himself had claimed that he was in the business of providing “documents for artists”. For a large sector of his clientele, that is, the artists and publishers who would benefit from his photographs, Old Paris was a subject to be beautified or romanticised. For his Vieux Paris clients in particular, Old Paris was subjected to conceptualisation as well as commodification. Whereas for Atget, Old Paris did not exist merely in thought or as an idea, nor did it not arise from any other “large contexts” as Benjamin proclaimed about the virtue of the anecdote. But rather, it had a physical and concrete existence. By means of the specific compositions he selected to make, Atget often pushed the boundaries of what was expected of his documents indeed. The past was a subject to be capitalised, to be sure; however, for Atget, it appears that Old Paris belonged foremost to its inhabitants: made visible through the toil and interaction of their unremarkable lives. Furthermore to an obscured segment of history that would not have otherwise been made visible, recorded for posterity by his photographic document.

In his compilation of writings titled *One-Way Street*, Benjamin included a revealing text dedicated to the fertile nature of “the document”, which makes the underlying design of Atget’s pictures explicitly daring. Published in Berlin in 1928 and just one year prior to Benjamin’s Surrealism essay, this brief passage comprises a list of short, contrasting sentences arranged in a bullet point form, where Benjamin presents the function of the document in direct juxtaposition to the formal work of Art. In this way, Benjamin desired to make

⁹³ Nesbit claims that in Atget’s time, “History and historical art were used as exempla, selected moral lessons for the perfection of the French nation. Far from being unencumbered facts, styles represented relative powers and entire cultures, aspirations and myths. Atget would know these lessons from many sources, his decorator clients, his Vieux Paris connections, and his own political life.” See Molly Nesbit, *Atget’s Seven Albums* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1994), 110, 112.

a cunning assessment of the role of the artist in his day. He appropriately titled this piece, "Thirteen Theses Against Snobs":⁹⁴

- | | | |
|-------|---|---|
| I. | <i>The artist makes a work.</i> | <i>The primitive man expresses himself in documents.</i> |
| | (...) | |
| III. | <i>The art-work is a masterpiece.</i> | <i>The document serves to instruct.</i> |
| | (...) | |
| VIII. | <i>In the art-work subject matter is a ballast jettisoned during contemplation.</i> | <i>The more one loses oneself in a document, the denser the subject matter grows.</i> |
| | (...) | |
| X. | <i>The art-work is synthetic: an energy centre.</i> | <i>The fertility of the document demands: analysis.</i> |
| | (...) | |
| XII. | <i>The artists sets out to conquer meanings.</i> | <i>The primitive man barricades himself behind subject-matter.</i> |

Through the choice of words like "masterpiece" or "contemplation" and the conquering of "meanings", Benjamin's view of the document challenges all of the traditional attitudes towards art, which in that time were more than likely

⁹⁴ Excerpt from 'Thirteen Theses Against Snobs' in *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London, New York: Verso, 2006), 65.

also shared by Atget and his clientele.⁹⁵ However if Atget had the opportunity to read Benjamin's text, which was published just one year after his death, to what extent would he have agreed with these differences separating the document from art? His actions show that he was actually receptive to Benjamin's virtues of the document. It certainly accounts for Atget's indifference to becoming a traditional artist of his time. Not only does it explain his puzzling behaviour toward the avant-garde: the fact that Atget did not want any publicity or the insistence that his photographs were "just documents", but it also explains his outspokenness to separate himself from artists, drawing a distinct boundary line as Benjamin here has done, in order to cater to them unreserved, promoting himself as a documentarian in his time.⁹⁶ Perhaps it is because Benjamin's text spells out the differences between the idealism of art and the realism of the document, that Atget would concur. An artwork requires the creative skill of the artist, whereas Atget

⁹⁵ "Snob in the private office of art criticism," is how Benjamin actually begins this passage. By composing a spoof on art criticism, this is the Surrealist-inspired way that Benjamin chose to make an intelligent snapshot of his epoch. The "snob" is an important as well as a recurrent motif in Benjamin's writings and appears to be a concrete manifestation of Modernity. In his 'Expose of 1935' Benjamin writes: "The snob, who lives in the semblant world of the new and ever identical, has a constant companion: boredom." See 'Expose of 1935' (earliest preserved draft) in *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 916. The motif of "boredom", which is the ultimate state of consciousness in the mind of the modern consumer par excellence, is another explicit manifestation of Modernity: "Boredom is a warm gray fabric lined on the inside with the most lustrous and colourful silks. In this fabric we wrap ourselves when we dream. We are at home then in the arabesques of its lining. But the sleeper looks bored and gray within his sheath. And when he later wakes and wants to tell of what he dreamed, he communicates, by and large, only his boredom." See 'Paris Arcades < II >', *Ibid.*, 881. With respect to art criticism, the figure of the snob and his boredom may be best understood as a cunning exemplar of bourgeois culture together with the culmination of excessive dreaming, which is obviously associated with a proliferation of commodities, including that of Art. In Benjamin's writing, all this vehement criticism should be seen as a reaction against how art was becoming totally commercialised: to the degree that "the total work of art represents an attempt to impose myth on society." See 'Expose of 1935', *Ibid.*, 916.

⁹⁶ According to Nesbit, Atget actively wanted to participate in the cultural landscape of his time indeed, but from the position of photographer as "author" rather than that of an artist. Her research shows evidence that on several occasions Atget endeavoured to print monographs of his albums. In her chapter 'The Author', she discusses the implications of Atget's change in professional status, where in 1902, he proceeded to give himself the formal title of "auteur-editeur". See Molly Nesbit, *Atget's Seven Albums* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1994), 90.

chose to express himself in documents. In the case of the photographer, the “primitive man” in Benjamin’s text expresses himself in a simple and direct style, deliberately rejecting any sophisticated artistic techniques, and for good reason. Hence his subjects do not rely on any mediating constructions or impressionism but on closeness and accuracy. The document could provide the optimum shortcut and a direct link to the subject itself, virtually erasing all traces of the photographer.

When Benjamin wrote about the document, he in fact had his own work in mind. With *The Arcades Project*, his endeavour was to present an image of the social world of the previous 19th century, in all its immediacy. He had singled out this work as “the theatre of all my struggles and all my dreams.”⁹⁷ As it happens, Benjamin would eventually find himself engrossed in an experimental literary montage comprised exclusively of quotations. Bringing together the many hundreds of citations meticulously researched from the views of the day, he became a primitive in his own right. For over a decade of the last years of his life, Benjamin would see himself barricaded behind the dense subject matter of a colossal project: in a proliferating mass of documents for the purpose of writing the most unconventional history of pre-

⁹⁷ Cited in Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 96. This is how Benjamin described this project in a letter to his friend Scholem on January 20, 1930.

modern times ever written.⁹⁸ His friend Ernest Bloch has described Benjamin's major and unfinished work as a text:

“brimming with miscellany, a tortuous piece of work in which he even wanted to obliterate all traces of himself as author and let the mere documents speak for themselves.”⁹⁹

In what ways does Atget's work correspond to the formulation of Benjamin's historic gaze? In the same manner as Atget, Benjamin was no historian. However through their work, they both made use of the factual record generated by their mediums in a bold and unprecedented manner with the intention to preserve an intimate connection with the past. Their objectives are comparable. Atget systematically focused on things that were in the process of passing out of history. His work is a photographic collection showing the various aspects of the city that were to ultimately disappear, and with them, the conduct of an entirely different mode of life. Through a collection of literary fragments, *The Arcades Project* offers a similar, materialistic presentation of history: by rescuing the matter of the past,

⁹⁸ Benjamin coined this specific and unconventional approach to writing history as “the art of citing”. He wrote of *The Arcades Project*: “This work has to develop to the highest degree the art of citing without quotation marks. Its theory is intimately related to that of montage.” See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 458 (N1,10). Benjamin collected excerpts of writing from a wide range of sources: newspaper and magazine articles, journals, theatrical works, literature, etc. In a section of the *Arcades Project* his notation claims: “To write history thus means to *cite* history.” (emphasis original) *Ibid.*, 476 (N11,3). We are persuaded into visualising some kind of experimental “scrapbook” here as the medium for his research. However because this project was never completed before his untimely death in 1940, we have no exact way of knowing just how Benjamin intended to present this work. *The Arcades Project* is currently published as a mass of quotations and notes that are separated thematically into “Convolutés”, including several articles that were intended for publication in the form of drafts that are in various stages of completion.

⁹⁹ Cited in Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 115. Helpful here is also Tiedemann's commentary on the actual construction of the project through which Benjamin was to employ these citations: “He tried to represent the nineteenth century as ‘commentary on a reality’ (O⁰, 9), rather than construing it in the abstract.” See Rolf Tiedemann, ‘Dialects at a Standstill: Approaches to the Passengen-Werk’, in *The Arcades Project*, (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 932. Elsewhere in his essay he writes, “Benjamin's intention was to bring together theory and materials, quotations and interpretation, in a new constellation compared to contemporary methods of representation. ... Benjamin wanted to submerge himself in hitherto ignored and scorned reaches of history and to salvage what no one had seen before him.” *Ibid.*, 932, 933.

unrefined and in the raw, it serves as a primal record that allows for a socio-cultural image of modern life to emerge.¹⁰⁰ For Atget and his photography, the systematic action that he took for the making of his images may be summarised by the following passage. It describes the method by which Benjamin ultimately aimed to revolutionise historical literature:

I needn't say anything. Merely show. I shall appropriate no ingenious formulations, purloin no valuables. But the rags, the refuse – these I will not describe but put on display.¹⁰¹

It is interesting to note here that according to Gilloch, there appears to be a close resemblance between the visualities of Benjamin and Atget. Gilloch writes:

Benjamin is concerned with the physical structure of the city and the material objects found therein as a setting for, and as indices of, social activity... Benjamin is particularly interested in the minutiae and marginalia of the urban setting. His description of the French photographer Eugène Atget is almost a self-portrait in this respect.¹⁰²

Gilloch claims that Atget's photographs and the matter-of-fact manner in which they evoked the presence of people's lives was in absolute accord with Benjamin's general preoccupation with the metropolis, where social life was explored against a backdrop of the commonplace and banal aspects of the city. Gilloch is to quote the following excerpt from Benjamin's essay "Small History of Photography" to make his point:

Atget always passed by the 'great sights' and so-called 'landmarks'; what he did not pass by was a long row of boot lasts; or the Paris courtyards, where from night to morning the hand-carts stand in serried ranks; or the

¹⁰⁰ Loosely termed "Convolutés", the large catalogue of themes that *The Arcades Project* grew to encompass is diverse: streets and warehouses, domestic interiors, iron construction, photography, panoramas, world exhibitions, types of lighting, fashion, advertising and prostitution, collectors, the flaneur and the gambler, boredom. "They belong to those urban phenomena that appeared in the early nineteenth century, with the emphatic claim of the new, but they have meanwhile lost their functionality. Benjamin discovered the signature of the early modern in the ever more rapid obsolescence of the inventions and innovations generated by a developing capitalism's productive forces. He wanted to recover that feature from the appearances of the unsightly, *intentione recta*, the physiognomic way: by showing rags, as a montage of trash." Rolf Tiedemann, 'Dialects at a Standstill: Approaches to the Passengen-Werk', *Ibid.*, 932.

¹⁰¹ Walter Benjamin, 'First Sketches, Paris Arcades < I >', *Ibid.*, 860 (O°, 36).

¹⁰² Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 7.

tables after people have finished eating and left, the dishes not yet cleared away – as they exist in their hundreds of thousands at the same hour; or the brothel at Rue...No. 5, whose street number appears, gigantic, at four different places on the building's façade.¹⁰³

Both Benjamin and Atget invested in the document because to all intents and purposes, they ultimately preferred evidence as opposed to creating an interpretation of the world. Through their work, they preferred to display facts rather than fantasy. But this is not their only similarity. Through their prolific practice, both were obliged to manage immensely large bodies of work: fragments that had to be systematically ordered into groups according to subject. Whether the medium was a photographic image or that of an excerpt in a piece of writing, one could say that both Atget and Benjamin became voracious collectors in their own right. In the following pages, I will illustrate how for Atget, the remnants of the city's past are to become salvaged, collated, and consequentially vested with meaning for making sense of the present. Benjamin does likewise, but with a temporal twist: through the act of collecting, redeeming the matter of the past is to carry the revolutionary potential for revealing an image of the future.

Seeing Historically: Recollecting the Past

In the early 20th century, collecting had remained a popular pastime since the early Victorian times. In 1910, the vitrine of the collector's library appears in Atget's series "Paris Interiors" as if it was a customary furnishing of a house, such as a mantelpiece or a washbasin.¹⁰⁴ [See Image 1.12] In the course of

¹⁰³ Ibid., 7. See also, Walter Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography', in *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London, New York: Verso, 2006), 251-2.

¹⁰⁴ Atget's business records illustrate that he photographed the various popular styles of interior décor for his set designer clientele. Similar to most of the photographs in the series, the title accompanying this image shows that the apartments were classified according to their owner's personality or profession.



1.12 Eugene Atget, *Intérieur de M.B., collectionneur* (*Interior of Mr. B., Collector*), Rue de Vaugirard (15^e arr.), 1910.

taking many thousands of photographs in his lifetime, to be sure, Atget became an archivist and a genuine collector of subjects himself. A brief summary of his working methods reveals an ordered yet versatile system, much in the line of a modern, organized image bank. He worked on different series concurrently. Pictured in typologies or ordered into various albums, he possessed thousands of views of a general historical interest, simultaneously enabling him to use the different parts of his archive for a variety of different uses, each according to circumstance and as he saw fit.¹⁰⁵ In other

words, within the vibrancy of the modern age, Atget assumed an active role as a supplier of images in the centre of what was none other than the media culture of his time. With respect to Atget scholarship together with all that is conclusively known about his work, in what ways, therefore, could Atget's photographs and collecting as cultural practice possibly be compared? For photography historian David Company, collecting was central to Modernity and foremost, to the ordering of modern society.

The culture of Modernity that gave rise to the mass production of objects, to scientific rationality and the discourses of History, also gave rise to the museum, state archives and the desire to collect. Photography was

¹⁰⁵ Man Ray has given an account of his visits to Atget's studio: "He had albums which he printed on a little frame, putting it outside his window to dry in the back yard in the sun, and as soon as he had the prints, he put them in a book. You could go to him and buy a print for five francs and then he'd replace it. ... I would drop in once in a while and pick up a few prints. He had thousands of them: he'd photographed so much in this lifetime." Interview with Man Ray in *Dialogue with Photography*, ed. Paul Hill and Thomas Cooper, (Manchester: Cornerhouse Publications, 1992), 23.

central to all of these, central to the assembling and ordering of modern society.¹⁰⁶

Company claims that owing to an increasingly technocratic society, the ideal format for a socially engaged and reflective photographic practice became the popular book.

Historically the connection between photography and the book has been closest in relation to what we might loosely call straight photography, clear frontal and rectilinear. Here the subject matter insists in such a way that the photograph seems as much a cutting out of the thing or person in the world as a picture. A book of these, then, becomes a collection of things as much as a collection of images. It functions as an archive, catalogue or atlas.¹⁰⁷

In Atget's photographic documents, particularly the albums that he arranged to function as historical records for the libraries of the state, each subject could be seen as the thing itself as much as a picture. This granted Atget the conviction that in his archive, he did "possess" all of Old Paris indeed. But what is it about Atget's photographs that gives them historical value? One could argue that they are simply images of buildings and streets.

In the final section of this chapter, I wish to explore the photographic image as a collected object, along with how it may function as objective evidence for producing a historically charged image of the world. I have already made reference to the power of document to instruct, in addition to how it became central to the work of both Atget as well as Benjamin for providing a direct link to the subject itself and a window into modern life. Similar to the function of the document, a collected object can yield multiple trajectories of knowledge. It can reflect the origin and the history of a subject, which would otherwise become lost with the passing of time. I will introduce Benjamin's idea of the "dialectical" image, whose function is to restore a missing consciousness to

¹⁰⁶ David Company, "Almost the Same Thing", *Some Thoughts on the Collector-Photographer*, in *Cruel and Tender: The Real in the Twentieth-Century Photograph*, ed. Emma Dexter and Thomas Weski (London: Tate Publishing, 2003), 33.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

the past. On account of consumer capitalism in Modernity and its overall destructive effect on culture and memory, it is a task which according to Benjamin was of paramount importance for society. I will end by illustrating how for the mind of the observer, Atget's photographs perform the function of establishing objective evidence for "seeing historically", evoking in this way, a much needed historical awareness and a critical reflection on the world.

For Benjamin, the act of collecting was viewed as both an intricate as well as an enlightening form of historical research. Generally speaking, by scavenging through the old and the outmoded that has fallen into disuse, collecting was a way to reify or concretise the existing rupture between present and past, which modern life had set in motion. 'It is the particular effect on vision that is associated with the practice of collecting, which is the subject of my interest. For Benjamin, the practice of collecting enabled him to see through time. He claimed that for the collector, through each and every object in his collection, he could ultimately see its entire past. "For the true collector" Benjamin would write in his First Sketches, embodied in every single one of his possessions lay the power to formulate:

... a whole magic encyclopaedia, a world order, whose outline is the *fate* of his object. Here, therefore, within this circumscribed field, we can understand how great physiognomists (and collectors are physiognomists of the world of things) become interpreters of fate. It suffices to observe just one collector as he handles the items in his showcase. No sooner does he hold them in his hands than he appears inspired by them and seems to look through them into their distance, like an augur.¹⁰⁸

Benjamin grants the collector with a unique mode of vision, which can penetrate straight through time itself. Similar to the function of the document, a collected object can yield multiple trajectories of knowledge. What are made visible are the object's origin and its history, revealing its value across

¹⁰⁸ (Emphasis original) Walter Benjamin, 'First Sketches, Paris Arcades < I >', in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 858 (O^o, 7). In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin included an entire chapter on the practice of collecting. "Collecting is a primal phenomenon of study: the student collects knowledge," he claimed. Walter Benjamin, 'Convolute H: The Collector' *Ibid.*, 210 (H4,3).

time. Benjamin's interest goes beyond the monetary worth of an object or its resale value, for this value is not a trait that can be subjected to appraisal by the antique business. He is more concerned with recovering whichever utopian elements lie at the moment of an object's inception, together with its impact across time, in order to gain insight into the past through a distinct form of cultural history. Benjamin's view is very broad: "Every age unavoidably seems to itself a new age. ... There has never been an epoch that did not feel itself to be 'modern' in the sense of most eccentric, and suppose itself to be standing directly before an abyss," he wrote in his *First Sketches*.¹⁰⁹ Through the practice of collecting, and this is extremely important, Benjamin would distinguish how the material world was bound with the inspiration of its makers and in turn, with the memories of society at large. It is precisely in this way that each and every object was invested with a past "future" before its decline. In addition, Benjamin would persist in maintaining a spatialized distance from the past.¹¹⁰ It would lead him to write about the "afterlife" in works, which he loosely defined as the measure of all that which

¹⁰⁹ Walter Benjamin, 'First Sketches, Paris Arcades< I >', *Ibid.*, 846 (I^o, 2).

¹¹⁰ Gilloch claims that "Benjamin links time and space in two ways: the journey into the past is a voyage into the distance, and movement in memory like that in a labyrinth. ... For Benjamin, time is not a linear progression. The past is not left behind as one moves on, but, like spaces in a labyrinth, is continually encountered again, returned to, though approached from different directions." See Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 68.

remains valuable or worth saving about a subject *after* its popularity, to be the principal matter of history itself.¹¹¹

For Benjamin, the dreaming collective knew no history. By looking back into the past, a task that Benjamin himself exercised with rigour, he got “a glimpse of the field of debris left behind by the capitalist development of the forces of production.”¹¹² Benjamin attributed this particular mode of looking, that is, the scavenging through debris for “ruins” to an achievement of Surrealism:

Balzac was the first to speak of the ruins of the bourgeoisie. But he still knew nothing about them. It was Surrealism which first got a glimpse of the field of debris left behind by the capitalist development of the forces of production. ...it was Surrealism that first opened our eyes to them. These ruins became, for Surrealism, the object of a research no less

¹¹¹ “Historical ‘understanding’ is to be grasped, in principle, as an afterlife of that which is understood; and what has been recognised in the analysis of the ‘afterlife in works,’ in the analysis of ‘fame,’ is therefore to be considered the foundation of history in general.” Walter Benjamin, ‘Convolute N: On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress’, *Ibid.*, 460 (N2,3). Elsewhere he writes: “An object of history is that through which knowledge is constituted as an object’s rescue.” *Ibid.*, 476 (N11,4). It is important at this point to see the reasoning behind Benjamin’s interest in the past as well as the underlying concern for its rescue. The analysis of Benjamin scholar Esther Leslie has become particularly helpful here. In a straightforward manner, Leslie retrospectively weaves together Benjamin’s disenchantment with Modernity and the threat to memory together with his growing interest in historiography to make a hypothesis of his objectives in the following passage: “Fashion’s permanent churning out and its adjustments of styles and types endlessly renews products, dispensing novel modes of presentation, new images, new needs and wants. The Surrealists instruct Benjamin that there are few things more socially poignant than these two: a once much-desired beauty from another epoch who now appears embarrassingly unfashionable; and a kaput gramophone, catapulted into uselessness. Like the Surrealists, Benjamin’s interest in the technological is directed not just at the new possibilities of hi-tech – the promises of utopias to come – but also at the revealing psychic reverberations and historically resonant energies of the passé – the uncashed utopian tokens of the past. Benjamin conceives of his remembered objects as the Surrealists conceived of the bric-a-brac they found in Parisian flea markets. Benjamin proposes the liberation of such dreams or energies from the past, stored up in objects – or remembered objects – like power in a battery... Benjamin sets the revival of the unfashionable against the myth of progress, a myth that constructs a permanent present oriented to the promise of an ameliorated future. For progress-mongers the past is mobilised only to show that it is a place that we have, thankfully, left behind to move on to somewhere better. For Benjamin, the past is mobilised to show how the dividends it promised have not yet been doled out.” See Esther Leslie, ‘Telescoping the Microscopic Object: Benjamin the Collector’ in *The Optic of Walter Benjamin, Vol. 3, dis-, dis-, ex-*, ed. Alex Coles (Black Dog Publishing Limited, 1999), p. 77.

¹¹² Walter Benjamin, ‘Exposé of 1935’ (earliest preserved draft) in *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 898.

impassioned than that which the humanists of the Renaissance conducted on the remnants of classical antiquity.¹¹³

It was for this reason that his work comprised the task of awakening, in order that we, the collective, may apprehend the dream. In other words, Benjamin was concerned with demystifying the fetish of the commodity, which he felt dominated the time in which he lived. By examining its production and consumption through a sophisticated form of reflection, Benjamin managed to make the Surrealist motif of dreaming into a dreamscape more concrete. This reflection would comprise an innovative play with time itself. Presented now through a different, more sober optic of a world of “dreamed things”, the matter of the 19th century would cease to appear to be obscured by mystery or myth:

The new, dialectical method of doing history teaches us to pass in spirit – with the rapidity and intensity of dreams – through what has been, in order to experience the present as waking world, a world to which every dream at last refers.¹¹⁴

In the course of such an undertaking, each separate object of the material world is seen to harbour its own distinct memories and history. Collected and arranged for inspection, the subject blasts open an array of unconscious and repressed knowledge, furthermore made visible and concrete. Benjamin's desire for historical awakening provided the impetus for experimenting not only with psychoanalysis, but also with the implications of time itself.

With *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin's strategy is to reintroduce the past into the present in the most arresting and straightforward manner. Without any

¹¹³ Ibid., 898.

¹¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, 'Paris Arcades <II>', Ibid., 884 (h^o, 4). Presumably Benjamin's task for awakening draws its inspiration from Karl Marx. In the *Arcades Project*, Convolute N begins with a short excerpt from a letter from Marx in 1843: "The reform of consciousness consists *solely* in ... the awakening of the world from its dream about itself." (emphasis original) Walter Benjamin, 'Convolute N: On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress', Ibid., 456. Furthermore, Tiedmann claims that Benjamin assumed the unique task of "acting as an interpreter of the dreams of the 19th century world of things." He draws attention to the fact that "Benjamin knew that this motif of awakening separated him from the Surrealists." 'Dialects at a Standstill: Approaches to the Passengen-Werk', Ibid., 934.

intervening factors or intermediaries that was warranted by the use of the document, Benjamin devises what he would term the “dialectical image”, so that we might “recognise today’s life, today’s forms, in the life and in the apparently secondary, lost forms of that [previous] epoch.”¹¹⁵ For Benjamin, the dialectical image would be the revolutionary means to awaken from consumer capitalism. Benjamin writes in his expose of 1935:

They [commodities] are residues of a dream world. But given that the realisation of dream elements, in the course of waking up, is the paradigm of dialectical thinking, it follows that dialectical thinking is the organ of historical awakening. Only dialectical thinking is equal to the recent past, because it is, each time, its offspring. Every epoch, in fact, not only dreams the one to follow but, in thus dreaming, precipitates its awakening.¹¹⁶

The function of the dialectical image is to restore a missing consciousness to the past. When the present-day is detected in the previous forms of the recent past, recognition or awareness in what Benjamin loosely termed “what has been” becomes retrieved.

There is not-yet-conscious knowledge of *what has been*: its advancement has the structure of awakening.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, ‘Convolute N: On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress’, *Ibid.*, 458 (N1,11).

¹¹⁶ See Walter Benjamin, ‘Exposé of 1935’ (earliest preserved draft), *Ibid.*, 898. See also, ‘Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century’, <Exposé of 1935>, *Ibid.*, 13.

¹¹⁷ (emphasis original) See Walter Benjamin, ‘Paris Arcades II’, *Ibid.*, 883 (h,2). In regard to the unconscious knowledge of “what has been”, Benjamin here was particularly influenced by his friend Ernst Bloch, who maintained that the individual had difficulty in apprehending his or her own time, in a concept that he termed “the darkness of the lived moment”. Benjamin claims, “...what Bloch recognizes as the darkness of the lived moment, is nothing other than what here is secured on the level of the historical, and collectively. There is a not-yet-conscious knowledge of *what has been*: its advancement has the structure of awakening.” *Ibid.*, 884 (h^o, 4). Tiedemann is helpful here: “Just as for Bloch the experiencing individual has not yet achieved mastery over himself at the moment of experiencing, for Benjamin the historical phenomena remain opaque, unilluminated for the dreaming collective. In Bloch’s opinion, individual experience is always experience of the immediate past; in the same way, Benjamin’s interpretation of the present refers to the recent past: action in the present means awakening from the dream of history, an ‘explosion’ of what has been, a revolutionary turn.” Rolf Tiedemann, ‘Dialects at a Standstill: Approaches to the Passengen-Werk’, *Ibid.*, 936.

For Benjamin, the dialectical image mirrors the aspirations of society, while its purpose is to disclose both the utopian as well as nihilistic energies that have been severed from us through the acceleration of time. In his notes, Benjamin writes under the heading “Methodological”:

Dialectic images are wish symbols. Actualised in them, together with the thing itself, are its origin and its decline.¹¹⁸

Furthermore, in the mass of material that comprises *The Arcades Project*, there appears within Benjamin’s notes a chart titled “Dialectic Seeing”:

<i>Thesis:</i> Flowering of arcades	<i>Antithesis:</i> Decline of arcades	<i>Synthesis:</i> Discovery of arcades, the unconscious knowledge becomes conscious, theory of awakening, dialectic of persp. fashion, sentim. ¹¹⁹
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¹¹⁸ See Walter Benjamin, ‘Exposé of 1935’ *Ibid.*, 911. It should be noted here that the best example of Benjamin’s engagement with the dialectical image is *The Arcades Project* itself, an idea which originated from an interest in architecture: Obsolete and subjected to demolition, Benjamin’s generation witnessed the decline of the Paris arcades, which since the early 19th century had been a popular type of architecture that housed boutiques selling luxurious and fashionable commodities of all kinds. The construction of the boulevards brought about the decline of the arcades, which by the early 20th century were reduced to bric-a-brac shops. For Benjamin, the arcades were the forerunners of the modern department store. As prefigured spaces of the “dreaming” collective, Benjamin’s endeavour was to capture the most enduring elements inspired by the arcades before they were to be subsequently replaced by the newer forms of modern, “mythic” places of consumption. Presented through the prism of “dialectic seeing”, the social activity associated with arcades is designed to integrate and clash with our knowledge of the present modern experience with commodities. It is in this way that *The Arcades Project* attempts to deploy the “technique of awakening” from consumer capitalism. Gilloch has noted, “The notions of afterlife and dialectical image combine in Benjamin’s consideration of the derelict arcade. Benjamin observes that the historian ‘recognises objects as they are in the moment of their extinction.’ ... The dialectical image captures the last fleeting moments of the afterlife of the object, the precise instant of demise in which illusion withers and truth becomes manifest. On the brink of oblivion, the crumbling arcade reveals itself as the locus of dreaming. The dialectical image is the redemptive ‘at last site’ of the ruined phantasmagoria of modernity.” See Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 127.

¹¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, ‘Exposé of 1935’ (earliest preserved draft), *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 910.

As it appears from Benjamin's notation, his idea of "dialectic seeing" draws its inspiration from the process of thought termed by the ancient Greeks, and subsequently Hegel, by which "thesis" and "antithesis" are seen to be part of a higher truth: "synthesis". What becomes clear is that the dialectical image is not a conventional image. For the observer it may be best understood as an "experience", or rather more distinctly a "jolt", which is orchestrated to produce a compelling engagement with the past. It happens precisely by recognising our present in the lost or forgotten forms separating us through time. The dialectical image is a latent image. It conceals a particular kind of insight, and surfaces instantaneously like a flash of lightning. "In it lies time," Benjamin would write in his *First Sketches*, "...real time enters the dialectical image... in its smallest gestalt."¹²⁰ Put simply, it is a raw image in which the matter of the past and the present are to intersect or collide.

It may be said that Benjamin first encountered the dialectical image through the technology of photography. Unique in its capability to record with light, the camera is a mechanical device that sustains a special relation to time. In the most convincing manner, it can capture a realistic rendering onto photographic film to delineate the true appearances of space and time. In this respect the photograph produces an image that is foremost, tainted by reality. Like no other kind of picture, for the viewer it can yield a direct encounter with the past and the present, to produce an astonishing impact with time.

Benjamin writes in his 'Small History of Photography':

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 of contingency, of the Here and Now, with which reality has so to speak seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in

¹²⁰ Walter Benjamin, 'First Sketches, Paris Arcades < I >', *Ibid.*, 867 (Q^o, 21). Gilloch has explained the dialectical image as "a pause, a moment of interruption and illumination, in which the past and present recognise each other across the void which separates them. See Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 113.

the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future subsists so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it.¹²¹

Benjamin distinguishes two separate temporalities that are connected with the reading of photographs. One is comprised of the time that is captured on film and the other comprises the time of the viewer who is looking at the image. When looking at a photograph, the present moment of the viewer clashes with the long forgotten past that is visible in the photograph in such a way that in the mind of the observer, a particular kind of insight emerges in the form of a dialectical image. What emerges is an informal and intuitive, yet potent burst of historical understanding: an unexpected disclosure or revelation about the world, which for the viewer is rationally known to have already taken place. The subject is seen against a wealth of present knowledge, while the past can be measured against all that has happened up until the "Here and Now". It is precisely in this way that photographs invite a conscious reflection of the space that has separated the past from the present time. When time becomes spatialized, photography in effect offers the viewer a unique experience of tracing the course of a subject backwards and forwards *through time*. It allows us to see a remarkable "afterimage" of "what is going to happen" or the "fate" of things, as Benjamin had expressed it, through a web of past and future time. Benjamin scholar Esther Leslie demonstrates how the subject of the photograph automatically becomes filtered through this array of temporalities:

The future of the image's subject frozen in the lost moment of the photograph might be rediscovered in the clash between the presented moment of the past and the viewer's standpoint in the present. The viewer retro-predictively scans photographs for the history that will happen. Only photography can perform this

¹²¹ Walter Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography', in *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London, New York: Verso, 2006), 243. This excerpt is also cited by Gilloch. "The dialectical image is a historical snapshot," Gilloch claims. "It is the visualisation of the past as an image which receives its illumination from references to the present." See Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 113.

function, because of its peculiar appeal to viewers. Its mechanical analogical basis captures a moment in time indexically-iconically and exports it into the future. Photography brings objects closer and lays them out for inspection. It is in this sense that photography may be a place to locate evidence, a *'Tatort'*. This 'place of action' is where historical processes have actually taken place."¹²²

¹²² Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, (London, Sterling Virginia: Pluto Press, 2000), 48. It should also be added that in Leslie's passage, the German term "tatort" could mean "a scene of action" as well as a "scene of crime". Although Leslie does not make any reference to Atget here, this is the term Benjamin famously used to refer to Atget's photographs as "scenes of crime" (see p. 23, note 14). Moreover, most translations of Benjamin's original comment have been rendered "scenes of crime" as opposed to "scenes of action", in what Ian Walker characterises "the most famous single statement on Atget's work": an extravagant analogy of such proportions that "its melodrama has haunted Atget studies ever since." See, Ian Walker, *City Gorged With Dreams: Surrealism and Documentary Photography in Interwar Paris*, (Manchester University Press, 2002), 100. In addition, there has been some speculation by both Walker as well as Nesbit about which particular translation of "tatort" is more suitably aligned with Benjamin's original text. The basic difference between "scene of crime" and "scene of action" lies in the sense that in the first reading something "has" happened on the site, whereas the latter suggests "a stage where something will or could happen". Ibid., 100. Walker appears to agree with Nesbit's claim that, "given Benjamin's interest in detective stories and social injustice, 'crime' is probably not too strong." See Molly Nesbit, *Atget's Seven Albums* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1994), 218: note 54. On the other hand, Leslie, who has preferred "place of action" for her argument in this passage has in effect neutralized it to a place of "transition": a space where "historical processes have actually taken place." Benjamin, she writes, "conjures up the languages of police detection and mysticism. The photographer is a descendant of the augurs and haruspices – and the photographer's task is to reveal the guilt and point out the guilty in his pictures. ... The photographer provides an appropriately updated image for such forensic activity in a scientific age." See Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, (London, Sterling Virginia: Pluto Press, 2000), 48. From my own research, I have found a passage in the 'Expose of 1939', which indicates that for Benjamin, Atget's photographs of Old Paris were something much more powerful and dramatic than simple indices of history, and that "scenes of crime" is more in line with Benjamin's original thought. In this particular passage, Benjamin here speaks of the poet Edgar Allen Poe and presents him as "the first physiognomist of the domestic interior" in the genre of detective fiction. He concludes by writing, "The criminals in early detective novels are neither gentlemen nor apaches, but simple private citizens of the middle class." See Walter Benjamin, 'Expose of 1935' as well as 'Expose of 1939', in *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 9 & 20 respectively. This evokes a political interpretation of the "criminals" and the "guilty" with regard to Atget's depiction of the city. It echoes an indictment, the intention to assign fault. It is in perfect accord with Nesbit's commentary concerning the broader social context of urban renewal marking Atget's work, and her claim of Atget's "incomprehension of the modern bourgeois culture that would sacrifice its past in the name of progress and profit." See Molly Nesbit, *Atget's Seven Albums* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1994), 110.

We may look again to Benjamin's famous statement aligning Atget's photographs of Paris and its deserted streets with "scenes of crime". I would like to reconsider the point of view of the observer together with the meaning of "evidence", which Benjamin claims is brought to mind:

It has quite justly been said of him that he photographed them [deserted Paris streets] like scenes of crime. The scene of a crime, too, is deserted; it is photographed for the purpose of establishing evidence. With Atget, photographs become standard evidence for historical occurrences, and acquire a hidden political significance. They demand a specific kind of approach; free-floating contemplation is not appropriate to them. They stir the viewer, he feels challenged by them in a new way.¹²³

For the observer, "free-floating contemplation" is not appropriate because the subjects of Atget's photographs evoke a critical reflection on the world. The observer is faced with "evidence", which demands a specific kind of vision. They stir and challenge viewers precisely because through an investigative optic from their current position in time, they are challenged to assess all of the changes that may or may not have subsequently taken place through the passing of time.¹²⁴ Benjamin's "technique of awakening" becomes clearer now. The past is juxtaposed with the present to generate a cognitional, historically charged image of "progress" by the agency of time.¹²⁵ Benjamin's

¹²³ Walter Benjamin, 'Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), 220. Nesbit has commented on this passage: "The remark is famous now, and prescient, but it was only a remark. Benjamin did not say how political significance was hidden in the pictures or how the photographs became political – by reflection? by indictment? This was all he said. But we could nod in agreement anyway..." See Molly Nesbit, *Atget's Seven Albums* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1994), 120.

¹²⁴ "The Photographic image elicits historically charged perception, dependent on traces of historical meaning in the image and the passage of time that places the viewer in history." Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, (London, Sterling Virginia: Pluto Press, 2000), 48.

¹²⁵ I would like to suggest here that Atget's work encourages modern viewers to think historically by literally comparing the present with the past. This may explain the recent popularity of projects that aim to rephotograph the exact sites of Atget's original photographs, such as the "Atget Rephotographic Project": <http://usfinparis.arts.usf.edu/paris/atgetrephoto.html>, (accessed January 2010) and "Rephotographing Atget" by Christopher Rauschenberg. See also by Rauschenberg, *Paris Changing: Revisiting Eugène Atget's Paris*, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007).

desire for historical awakening provided the impetus for experimenting with temporality and montage, together with the visual technologies of photography and film in order to experience new ways of seeing the world. In the end, this raises the question of what particular kind of history he was inclined to really show:

What sort of perceptibility should the presentation of history possess? Neither the cheap and easy visibility of bourgeois history books, nor the insufficient visibility of Marxist histories. What it has to fix perceptually are the images from the collective unconscious.¹²⁶

Benjamin's unique historical gaze was not modelled after any conventional historical literature that existed of any kind. That is, he did not attempt to piece together fragments incrementally as a continuum of events through time. But rather, it was sourced from the rescued matter of past collective memory together with present knowledge, with which in the mind of the observer Benjamin tried to make collide.

Benjamin acquired his idea of the dialectical image through his engagement with Marxism and the practice of collecting. Indeed, Benjamin would have an opportunity to experience the effects of his dialectical seeing through the objects and excerpts that he collected himself, as well as his encounter with

¹²⁶ Walter Benjamin, 'Expose of 1935' (earliest preserved draft), in *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 911. The "collective unconscious" may be seen as the product of reconstructed collective histories or collective memories, as suggested here by Leslie: "Benjamin develops an odd gaze in which the role of memory signals a strategy for splicing historical continuity with political interpretation. In (re)constructing collective histories or collective memories, Benjamin proposes a 'collective unconscious' and suggests a creative relationship between generations and their wish-investments in new technologies and new products. See Esther Leslie, 'Telescoping the Microscopic Object: Benjamin the Collector' in *The Optic of Walter Benjamin, Vol. 3, dis-, dis-, ex-*, ed. Alex Coles (Black Dog Publishing Limited, 1999), p. 61.

old photographs, including the work of Atget.¹²⁷ For Benjamin, through the practice of collecting, that is, through a close inspection of the matter of the recent past such as old objects (as well as old photographs), a concrete awareness of "what has been" becomes the agency by which a real socio-political space opens up for each subject to fall in place.¹²⁸ It is in this way that historically charged vision is generated. Yet there is another, more telling passage in connection with the subject of art history that may best illustrate Benjamin's appreciation for collecting. It effectively combines his interest in historiography together with the more constructive, social role that Benjamin envisioned for Art; a matter which was advocated to become the underlying

¹²⁷ Leslie claims that "Benjamin's collections paralleled (and parodied) his parents' connoisseurial collections – his father was, after all, an antique dealer..." See Esther Leslie, 'Telescoping the Microscopic Object: Benjamin the Collector' in *The Optic of Walter Benjamin, Vol. 3, dis-, dis-, ex-*, ed. Alex Coles (Black Dog Publishing Limited, 1999), p. 65. Elsewhere she writes, "Benjamin was a collector. He collected children's books and toys, for reasons that are bound up with his anthropological-materialist concerns. Benjamin was a collector who made it his business to know his collections inside out, and he wrote expansively about those collections and his passions." *Ibid.*, 66.

¹²⁸ Atget's photographs present such an intimate view of the city and evoke lived experience, that his images are saturated with information that Benjamin terms "what has been". Atget's photographic documents focus knowledge in the same manner as collected objects. For example, Atget's series of carts ("Vehicles in Paris") inevitably prompt a modern image of automobiles, which could very well have been the catalyst for the following line of thought, a short passage where Benjamin makes specific reference to modes of transportation and exports the subject through time: "For us," Benjamin wrote in his First Sketches, "locomotives already have symbolic character because we met with them in childhood. Our children, however, will find this in automobiles, of which we ourselves see only the new, elegant, modern, cheeky side." Walter Benjamin, 'First Sketches, Paris Arcades< I >', (*Ibid*), (M^o, 20), p. 855. Moreover, Benjamin's disposition to see a subject evolve through time was instigated through the practice of collecting and the culmination of 12 years of research on *The Arcades Project*. The correlation between the subjects of the past and the present were not limited just to the derelict arcade and the modern department store. Benjamin broadened his work and remarkably juxtaposed specific personas or "character types" distinctive of the past 19th century in order to export them into [his] contemporary society of modern life. For example, he regarded the "dandy", the self-conscious figure of fashion and taste to be the precursor of the modern "mass consumer". In addition, he considered the "gambler", the financial speculator whose desire is to make money from money had evolved into the present day "stock-market investor". See Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis*, (Polity Press, 1996), p. 154 & 158, respectively

basis throughout so many of his writings.¹²⁹ Most importantly, the passage summarises the advantages comprising the impersonality of the document, that is, its capacity to furnish “evidence” as opposed to subjective expression, and makes explicit the particular quality that Benjamin had the acumen to detect in Atget’s work, when he used the trope of detective fiction to describe his photographs.

In 1937 Benjamin published an article on the German art historian Eduard Fuchs, for whom he had great admiration. ‘Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian’ is the title Benjamin had selected for his essay to speak about modern society, as he incorporated a various range of subject matter such as art collecting and market forces, as well as museums and the interpretation of art. Fuchs (1870-1940), who was a Marxist scholar of history and culture, but also a writer, a political activist as well as an art collector was credited by Benjamin for restoring the work of art “to its existence in society”, from which as he claimed, “it had been so completely cut off”.¹³⁰ Similar to Benjamin, through his work Fuchs is concerned with recovering a broader image of society at large. As an art historian, he looks to transcend the customary matters of technique that are associated with the creative skill of the artist or “the old master’s name”. Instead, he seeks to focus on the material evidence of culture in order to piece together traces that resonate with the broader social conditions comprising each particular work of art. In this specific passage, Benjamin quotes Fuchs with respect to the import of a distinct

¹²⁹ Leslie claims that, “For Benjamin, the ‘social function’ of contemporary art is the disclosure of truths about the structure of a reality that is subject to historical change. The most important art does not disclose eternal truths, but particular, fixed, historical truths.” Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, (London, Sterling Virginia: Pluto Press, 2000), 48.

¹³⁰ “His [Fuchs] idea was to restore the work of art to its existence in society, from which it had been so completely cut off that the place where he came upon it was the art market, where, as far removed from those who produced it as from those who were capable of understanding it, shrunk to mere merchandise, it yet survived. The fetish of the art market is the old master’s name. Historically it will perhaps be seen to have been Fuchs’ greatest service that he initiated the emancipation of art history from the fetish of the master’s name.” Walter Benjamin, ‘Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian,’ in *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London, New York: Verso, 2006), 384.

collection of anonymous sculpture from the T'ang period, for which none of its makers are known. Not only does it summarise the underlying objective of all art, that is, how an artwork should function or the kind of "evidence" that Benjamin ideally sought from cultural practice (including his own), but it also pinpoints the particular visuality that he saw manifested in Atget's photographs:

'The complete anonymity of these tomb furnishings', says Fuchs about the sculpture of the T'ang period, 'the fact that in no single instance do we know the individual creator of such a work, is an important proof that what we confront here is never the experience of a particular artist, but rather the way the world of things were seen in those days by society at large.'¹³¹

It is precisely this broad scope of vision comprising Atget's photographs, which generates historical vision. Moreover, today Atget's work is identified with the straight photographic aesthetic that is rooted in the impersonality of the document, which produced a historical turn for the photographic medium itself. The view of the American photographer Walker Evans is appropriate here:

The real significance of photography was submerged soon after its discovery... The latter half of the 19th century offers that fantastic figure, the art photographer, really an unsuccessful painter with a bag of mysterious tricks... Suddenly there is a difference between a quaint evocation of the past and an open window looking straight down a stack of decades... Actual experiments in time, actual experiments in space exactly suit a post-war state of mind. The camera doing both, it is not

¹³¹ Ibid., 384. Atget purged his images of personal impressions to the highest degree possible when he invested in the "document". By doing this he was in fact prioritising the subject and indeed creating an experience of the way the world of things were seen by society at large. Interestingly, Walker concludes his chapter 'A Surrealist Atget' by claiming that the various cumulative readings of Atget's work (including Benjamin's) have ultimately hindered our capacity to objectively see his photographs as "simply documents". While Walker's view may be correct, one could argue that today, Atget's photographs have not only lost their original nondescript quality, but they have largely also lost their attribute in what Benjamin advocated a source of "evidence", from the time of their discovery at beginning of the century. This is because Atget's images are now globally well known as "famous works of art" and are tainted with "the old master's name".

surprising that photography has come to a valid flowering – the third period of its history. ...Certain men of the past century have been noticed who stood away from this confusion. Eugène Atget worked straight through a period of utter decadence in photography. He was simply isolated and his story is a little difficult to understand. Apparently he was oblivious to everything but the necessity of photographing Paris and its environs; but just what vision he carried in him of the monument he was leaving is not clear. It is possible to read into his photographs so many things he may never have formulated to himself.¹³²

Indeed, owing to the fact that Atget was oblivious to everything but the necessity of photographing the city and its environs, Atget's imaging of Paris allows the observer a comprehensive view and a window into everyday modern life. Through the typologies he selected to make and the candid use of the camera as a recording device, Atget's photographs appear intimate and real, mirroring a civilisation of past time. In the end, both Benjamin and Atget look to have shared several common principles through their work, such as to make modern society the central subject of their concern, to effectively utilise the power of the document, as well as to struggle for historical truth. It may be possible that both ultimately derived inspiration from the realism of Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850), the French novelist who influenced generations with his literary works.¹³³ Balzac has been known to claim that, "Times are more interesting than people", which seems the only genuine way to summarise the conviction behind their own work.¹³⁴

¹³² Cited in Maria Morris Hambourg, 'Atget, Precursor of Modern Documentary Photography', in *Observations: Essays on Documentary Photography*, ed. David Featherstone (Carmel California: The Friends of Photography, 1984), 35. It has been claimed by Maria Morris Hambourg that Evans' insightful article 'The Reappearance of Photography' of 1931 helped to establish "Atget's place in history and plotted the program for modern documentary photography".

¹³³ Benjamin has made reference to Balzac in several of his writings, for example, see pp. 82 & 83, note 113. With respect to Atget, one may recall Berenice Abbott's famous quote referring to Atget as "A Balzac of the camera." In addition, Atget photographed the house of Balzac on two occasions, once in 1913 and subsequently in 1922. See David Harris, *Eugène Atget: Unknown Paris* (New York: The New Press, 2003), 30, 31.

¹³⁴ This is the first quotation to open Benjamin's 'Convolute N: On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress'. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 456.

PART II: Gursky's World

The images of the contemporary German photographer Andreas Gursky (b. 1955) aim to represent the zeitgeist of present-day modern society. For the last two decades, Gursky has looked to diverse urban centres throughout the world in order to produce a particular kind of image. More specifically, he portrays the physiognomy of capitalism in today's globalised society. Gursky's vision is very broad: urban growth, mass consumption, high-tech industry and international trade are just a few manifestations of this world-historical process we call globalisation, and they are all fertile subjects of research which function as a point of reference in his photographs. We all recognise these landscapes, they dominate the relentlessly changing environment in which we currently live. We may call to mind that for Atget and Benjamin in the early 20th century, the awareness that the world was changing in conjunction with the symptoms of Modernity was not only a matter of grave personal concern. This awareness also prompted them to look to the aesthetic radicalism of the document, which provided each with a historically charged perception for making sense of the world, fuelling their work with a deep sense of conviction and perseverance. In this day and age, how does the documentary aesthetic help Gursky to make a critical image of our own existing world?

In a Gursky photograph, the subject is always photographed in crisp detail, from a central perspective and usually from an elevated position. Whether the subject is architecture, a landscape, or an interior space that is full of people,

it is presented in this straightforward, dispassionate manner. Gursky adheres to this conventional method to generate an objective, unmediated view, ensuring that his role as photographer appears the most inconspicuous or insignificant. The camera becomes a mechanical eye for which in the mind of the viewer, there is no visible agent obstructing him or her from the subject.¹³⁵ It follows from this that Gursky approaches his subjects with maximum self-effacement, at the same moment he is exploiting the document's most powerful and most rewarding virtue: to allow for the eye of the beholder, the ability for each thing to "speak" or be seen for itself alone. For Benjamin as well as Atget, the document had the power to strip the subject bare of all unnecessary mystery or confusion and transform it into a form of "evidence" for generating radically alternative, historic truths. I wish to examine the documentary value of Gursky's work further, so that we may begin to see how his depiction of modern life makes full use of that power to generate some historic truths of his own.

There is also rigour in Gursky's practice. As a result, all of his photographs appear to be meditations on a single subject. He is a photographer who, similar to the pioneer documentarians of the past such as August Sander and of course, Eugène Atget, has adhered to a single theme in his work and

¹³⁵ Gursky is a former student of Bernd and Hilla Becher, whose unique approach to teaching had required their students to implement a strict and impersonal working method, one which was closely modelled after their own, highly regimented practice for documenting industrial architecture. See Peter Galassi, 'Gursky's World' in *Andreas Gursky*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2001), 16. See also, Susanne Lange, *Bernd and Hilla Becher Life and Work*, (Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, 2007).

expands it by employing motifs.¹³⁶ Even Benjamin's *Arcades Project* has been constructed with motifs or "convolutes", as I have tried to show in the previous chapter, which all pivot around the umbrella subject of 19th century modernity in Paris. In Gursky's work, major motifs comprise the spaces of "work" and "leisure" in today's modern world, for which he has taken numerous pictures of stock markets and factories, as well as places of mass gathering such as rock concerts, sporting events, tourist sites and others. In addition, he looks to many of the unremarkable public spaces of collective daily life, focusing on sites of consumption and mass transit such as supermarkets, subway stations and airports. In several ways, the rigour that Gursky exercises in his work is similar in character with Benjamin's model of the "primitive man": Gursky is a contemporary artist who chooses to express himself in documents, "barricading" himself behind an expansive subject matter, which happens to grow all the more dense with the passing of time. The photographer himself has stated:

I think that every picture in my work is another piece in the puzzle. In some ways this is an encyclopaedic approach.¹³⁷

Gursky engages in a comprehensive cataloguing of the landscapes that have been moulded by modern society. In fact, his subjects are sourced not only from the actual places that he finds travelling across the globe, but also from the systematic study of media's professional image industry, which modern

¹³⁶ The portraiture of German photographer August Sander (1878-1957) comprises a life long study of German society in his era, and was published in 1929 under the title 'Face of Our Time'. Sander had structured his portraits with specific motifs according to occupation, social class and family structure at the turn of the century. More specifically, the work as a whole (from which the book is only a small sample) is divided into seven groups or "social types", each corresponding to an existing social structure: 'The Farmer', 'The Skilled Tradesman', 'The Woman', 'Classes and Professions', 'The Artists', 'The City' and finally, 'The Last People' (the disadvantaged). See Suzanne Lange, 'August Sander's People of the 20th Century: It's Making and Impact', in *Cruel and Tender: The Real in the Twentieth-Century Photograph*, ed. Emma Dexter and Thomas Weski (London: Tate Publishing, 2003), 29.

¹³⁷ (Excerpt from an interview in 1999), cited in Martin Hentschel, 'The Totality of the World, Viewed in Its Component Forms, Andreas Gursky's Photographs 1980 to 2008', in *Andreas Gursky Works 80-08*, ed. Martin Hentschel (Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2008), 33: note 18.

society often employs to shape our vision of those places.¹³⁸ It is not surprising therefore, that Gursky has accumulated an extensive personal collection of media images, that is to say, landscapes where late capitalism is in evidence, with which to inform his work that he has found from various sources, namely, television, magazines and the Internet.¹³⁹

The rigour in Gursky's practice stems from an impulse that has powered the work characterising all modern artists, which is to reflect the conditions of their time.¹⁴⁰ For Benjamin in particular, the "social function" that he envisioned for cultural practice and for photography in particular, required that it disclose not

¹³⁸ In his critique of postmodernism, Frederic Jameson underscores a shift in cultural practice, which makes more use of representations rather than of reality. More specifically, Jameson refers to practice that incorporates "its own representation of itself" by using media sources (his example: the use of television programs) to evoke a specific time in history (i.e.: the 1950's): "However, although one does not confuse a person with what he or she thinks of himself/herself, such self-images are surely very relevant indeed and constitute an essential part of the more objective description or definition." Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (London, New York: Verso, 1991), 281.

¹³⁹ In a recent interview at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, Gursky reveals how his interest in collecting integrates with his methods of working: "I collect images which surround us... Now I have a big archive where I collect images and after awhile I lay everything down in the studio and I think about which subject is worth researching. Whereas in the past, in the 80's when I did landscapes, I researched more by travelling and discovering the world visually, now I am much more focused on reproductions, the internet and TV. ...Normally, the way I work is that I'm doing research in the media, I find my location, do further research and then I'm asking for permissions. Then I travel to this place and I'm doing my work. I think I'm a very slow worker, so I focus on one picture and the background idea for why I chose this location..." (Stockholm, where this interview took place was the first of the two cities to host the recent 2009 retrospective of Gursky's work before travelling to Vancouver). Nancy Tousley, 'Andreas Gursky: Interview With Insight, Vancouver Art Gallery May 30 to September 20, 2009', *Canadian Art Magazine*, <http://www.canadianart.ca/online/features/2009/07/09/andreas-gursky/> (accessed September, 2009).

¹⁴⁰ I make this assertion in consideration of Marshall Berman's view, who has defined the characteristics of modernist practice thus: "To be modern, is to experience personal and social life as a maelstrom, to find one's world and oneself in perpetual disintegration and renewal, trouble and anguish, ambiguity and contradiction: to be part of a universe in which all that is solid melts into air. To be a modernist is to make oneself somehow at home in the maelstrom, to make its rhythms one's own, to move within its currents in search of the forms of reality, of beauty, of freedom, of justice, that its fervid and perilous flow allows." (emphasis original) Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* (Verso, 1983), p. 345.

eternal truths, but rather “particular, fixed, historical truths”.¹⁴¹ For the contemporary viewer, Gursky’s photographs perform an analogous, social function. Consider the following diachronic comparison at this basic impulse to reflect the time in which one lives. It will reveal the manner in which Gursky’s work creates a critical view of our present society, as well as the broad scope of his vision. Take for example, his following two photographs: one depicting a discount supermarket (*99 Cent, 1999*) and the other, an image of a refuse dump in Mexico City (*Untitled XIII, 2002*). [See Images 2.1 & 2.2]

In both photographs, a dizzying multitude of objects fill the edges of the frame from one end to the other, creating a visually graphic and abstract view, as well as a phenomenological experience of order and chaos. At the same time, the photographs comprise an impersonal and concrete depiction of real places: landscapes that have been specifically chosen to make obvious consequential subjects such as “consumption” and “abundance”, which is in response to a broader view of our current condition in mind. For the German photo historian Martin Hentschel, it becomes clear that the two photographs

¹⁴¹ Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, (London, Sterling Virginia: Pluto Press, 2000), 48.

are “complementary pictures showing one and the same thing: society in all its affluence.”¹⁴² At this moment, I would like to compare these two photographs with a pair of images that appear to express a similar interest in subject matter, from the archive of Atget: *Rue Mouffetard, Paris, 1926* and *Inside a Rag-picker's House, boulevard Masséna, Paris 1912*. [See Images 2.3 & 2.4]



2.3 Eugene Atget, *Rue Mouffetard, Paris, 1926*.



2.4 Eugene Atget, *Inside a Rag-picker's House, boulevard Masséna, Paris, 1912*.

Atget took an equally broad interest in his environment; both in terms of social structure as well as its economic order. In observing the contemporary market forces of his day, he looked not only to the sidewalks of the marketplace and their outdoor displays brimming with consumer goods, but also to the junkyards of the rag-pickers, where many of these products, now rejected and considered worthless were soon to end up as recyclable refuse.¹⁴³ These images too, communicate specific historical truths and were

¹⁴² Martin Hentschel, 'The Totality of the World, Viewed in Its Component Forms, Andreas Gursky's Photographs 1980 to 2008', in *Andreas Gursky Works 80-08*, ed. Martin Hentschel (Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2008), 31.

¹⁴³ The historian Ian Jeffrey makes a similar point by indicating that the wide range of subject matter in Atget's archive is the evidence of a broader interest in society, an interest that had extended far beyond the city and its cultural heritage: "His [Atget] sense of the rootedness of culture was pervasive, and shows itself in the photographs of workshops, depots and yards, in which raw materials were worked to make the city and its furnishings. At the end of the scale he noted the junkyards and mean alleys in which the cycle completed itself." Ian Jeffrey, *Photography: A Concise History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1981), 141.

made in response to a broader view of the current condition in mind. The dispassionate and artless way that Atget has approached subjects like these almost a century ago, is a clear indication that the general concern for issues such as abundance, consumption, order or chaos in everyday life, all appear to be common elements of a personal and social maelstrom that is not altogether new and continues to this day.¹⁴⁴ In describing his practice, one might say that Gursky has modestly alluded to the challenges of a personal struggle of his own, when he stated:

My preference for clear structures is the result of my desire – perhaps illusory – to keep track of things and maintain a grip on the world.¹⁴⁵

Through his work, Gursky seeks nothing less than to illustrate our environment and its underlying economic structure, in all its complexity. Do his images function like documents that serve to instruct? Only when his photographs are seen cumulatively can one begin to comprehend the colossal subject of his undertaking. Here is capitalism incarnate: presented through a wealth of subjects corresponding to virtually all-possible aspects of contemporary life. As we put together the pieces of the puzzle, we begin to critically see through the structure of a global economy with which our current ways of living and working are modelled. But it does not end there. For the viewer, this often-menacing and alienating world appears to be both anywhere and everywhere at the same time. It is pervasive. Indeed, it encompasses the entire world:

I want my motifs to look as though I could have photographed them anywhere. The places are not meant to be specifically described, but are

¹⁴⁴ For Benjamin in particular, abundance and consumption comprised the “mythic” character of consumer capitalism itself. He witnessed how market forces deceptively succumbed us to a promising new world, which especially for his generation, was never to come. Benjamin’s personal maelstrom was how to wrestle with these contemporary forces: “unmask” them through his work into an act of “historic awakening” for others. The *Arcades Project* was the culmination of a personal struggle to invoke a clearer view of the current modern world, by means of a critical reflection of an earlier modernity of the recent past.

¹⁴⁵ Cited from Tate Modern, London website: “Cruel and Tender” exhibition, June 5 - September 7 2003, <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/cruelandtender/gursky.htm> (accessed September, 2009).

meant to function more as metaphors. I am interested in global viewpoints, in today's social utopias.¹⁴⁶

Gursky's motifs do not look as if they were photographed anywhere, of course. More often than not, they are assigned concrete titles, each time according to the city where the photograph was taken, and they effectively read like windows onto the world. From the outset, they are perceived to embody all the distinctive properties of an objective record. Gursky has utilised the documentary aesthetic to reflect the conditions of late 20th century life so effectively, that it has been recently claimed that:

What Gursky's photographs give the viewer, now and for the coming centuries, is nothing less than a fulfilment of the most universal claim to historic awareness.¹⁴⁷

While few would consider Gursky's photographs as historical documents, his elevated perspectives with sweeping panoramic views have nevertheless been compared to the likeness of history painting.¹⁴⁸ Visually sharp, unusually large in size and generally topographical in scope, it becomes evident that Gursky aims his photographs to function, foremost, in empowering the viewer with a fantastic sense of sight. Historical perspective is contingent on sight, in addition to the ways in which we are allowed or compelled to see through time itself. By echoing the manner of history

¹⁴⁶ (Excerpt from an interview in 2007), cited in Nina Zimmer, 'Pyongyang: A State of Exception' in the exhibition catalogue *Andreas Gursky, Kunstmuseum Basel*, (Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2008), 85.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 69. Nina Zimmer is an art historian and curator of Gursky's recent exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Basel, Switzerland (October 20, 2007 to February 28, 2008), which presented 25 of his latest works. The exhibition introduced him as an artist who has, foremost, captured the essence of our time: "Few artists have managed to distil the specific characteristics of a certain culture, the mindset of a generation or the zeitgeist of an era into a single work. Just as a handful of iconic paintings have shaped our view of the Renaissance, so too has Andreas Gursky captured the essence of the economic and social situation of the late twentieth century..." <http://www.kunstmuseumbasel.ch/en/exhibitions/archive/gursky/> (accessed October, 2009).

¹⁴⁸ Zimmer has linked Gursky to history painting by comparing the affinities between Gursky's elevated viewpoints and the perspective found in specific examples of 16th century battle painting. See Nina Zimmer, 'Pyongyang: A State of Exception' in the exhibition catalogue *Andreas Gursky, Kunstmuseum Basel*, (Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2008), 73.

painting, Gursky has managed to construct a panoptic visual experience that enables us to take in broad sweeps of time and space at a glance.¹⁴⁹

In the course of the remaining chapter, I wish to examine the visual experience of the viewer more closely in order to maintain that Gursky's images do indeed prompt a historically charged perspective of the world, but they do so in a highly unique way. Gursky's encyclopaedic approach and his endeavour to catalogue the landscapes of modern society formulate in effect what Benjamin had described as a "magic" encyclopaedia. Gursky's work delineates a world depicting the "fate" of his subjects. Instead of functioning to preserve a certain historical continuity to the past or to "rescue objects" that are passing out of history as Atget's work has so prominently shown, Gursky's work turns its back to the past to open a fantastic view into the future time to come. His photographs conjure up a realistic but exaggerated image of the world, as we know it, similar in character with the genre of science fiction. The landscapes in "Gursky's world" foreshadow events that are likely to happen all over the world, since the places in his photographs could have been photographed anywhere. They are intended to function as metaphors; thus they are "placeless" and interchangeable. I intend to demonstrate how through specific photographs, Gursky shapes an iconic and totalizing view of present-day society, which is telling far beyond the immediacy of the Here and Now. In the mind of the viewer, the photographs function, foremost, in signifying the future for all places, seeing that Gursky goes to great lengths to project such comprehensive image of the world, albeit a world which is visible

¹⁴⁹ The historian and curator James Lingwood takes up this theme in his catalogue essay for the exhibition "The Epic and the Everyday" (Hayward Gallery London, June 23 to August 29, 1994). Lingwood draws on the theory of the French historian Fernand Braudel to argue that Gursky's photographs reproduce the depth of historical experience by showing concurrently, multiple processes or phenomena that exist within a large expanse of time known "as the long duration": "The wide-angled view or the panoramic form integrates the dimension of historical experience... Gursky's photographs, singly and collectively, seem perfectly to embody Braudel's three times: the 'geographical' time of the land..., the 'social' time of the city, and the 'biological' time of the individual..." James Lingwood, 'Different Times', *The Epic and the Everyday: Contemporary Photographic Art, South Bank Centre London*, (London: Art Books International, 1994), 17.

in relation to the prospects of an inescapable, universally shared, imperfect world at best.¹⁵⁰ For all that, and in consideration of the documentary value of his work, one might accord Gursky with a quasi-scientific role as a great physiognomist of landscapes and a historian of the future.

Regardless of the visuality in Gursky's work and his ambitions to piece together and project nothing less than the prospects of the entire world, according to Frederic Jameson, that which gives rise to historic awareness is neither a depiction of the past nor one of an impending future, but rather, is simply a matter of an appropriate "distance from immediacy" that functions to defamiliarise our experience of the present:

Historicity is, in fact, neither a representation of the past nor a representation of the future (although its various forms use such representation): it can first and foremost be defined as a perception of the present as history; that is, as a relationship to the present which somehow defamiliarizes it and allows us that distance from immediacy which is at length characterised as a historical perspective.¹⁵¹

Gursky utilises the documentary aesthetic to evoke maximum realism, however in fact, it is the manner in which the world is rendered strange and unreal which effectively conjures up a sense of historical awareness in his photographs. Through an arresting series of exaggerations and foreshortenings that I will now begin to show, Gursky sets out to portray our contemporary socioeconomic condition by transforming the real world into a virtual world.

A large print covering the wall of a museum requires a large distance between the viewer and the photograph, yet allows for a gratifying scrutiny at close range. For the viewer in a gallery or museum, Gursky's preference for large,

¹⁵⁰ In the documentary *Gursky World*, the filmmaker Ben Lewis played the role of a narrator who was obsessed with the artist as "the ultimate observer of modern life", and couldn't help seeing Gursky where ordinary life should be. Convinced that he was living in a "Gursky world", Lewis set out to search and take photographs of Gursky-like locations in the city of Reading, which offered a variety of subjects and yielded relative success. See *The Art Show: Gursky World*, (Channel 4, 2002).

¹⁵¹ Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (London, New York: Verso, 1991), 284.

detailed prints make each photograph a panoramic scene through which to all intents and purposes, one can enter and become immersed.¹⁵² His broad landscapes, some of which are rendered from a bird's eye perspective from afar, and others, suggestive of satellite imagery from above, offer a unique futuristic experience and encourage observation at both macro and micro levels. In many of these scenes, human figures appear microscopic, schematic, or at best, depersonalised. Whether they are workers, tourists or simply passers-by, they are rendered at such a distance that they become reduced to diminutive figures that appear to simply function as key actors in a given action or process. Gursky has claimed that he is not interested in individuals as such, but rather in the "human species and its environment."¹⁵³ Practically, the work sets out to displace the viewer and defamiliarise our experience with modern life, since more often than not the observer is faced with an extraordinary as well as comprehensive image of familiar and unremarkable places. Peter Galassi has described the effects of such a perspective thus:

It makes the viewer a God-like presence, everywhere and nowhere at once, granting us a sense of overarching possession while excluding us from direct participation in the toylike realm.¹⁵⁴

As the world becomes rendered small and Lilliputian, we begin to see it with a distanced eye. Our familiarisation with these landscapes combined with the

¹⁵² In the 1990's, Gursky's photographs measured a size of 1.8 meters. In 2000, the print size for some of his works had reached 2 x 5 meters. See Peter Galassi, 'Gursky's World' in *Andreas Gursky*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2001), 28. Recently however, as a matter of practicality and in order to comply with the available space of the venues, many of the 150 works comprising Gursky's 2009 retrospective in Stockholm and Vancouver were unavoidably reprinted in smaller dimensions. See Martin Hentschel, Lars Nittve and Kathleen S. Bartels, Foreword to *Andreas Gursky Works 80-08*, ed. Martin Hentschel (Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2008), 9.

¹⁵³ "I often show human figures from behind and thus the landscape is observed 'through' a second lens. I don't name the activities of the human figures specifically and hence do not question what they do in general. The camera's enormous distance from these figures means that they become de-individualized. So I am never interested in the individual, but the human species and its environment." Excerpt from a conversation with Veit Görner, '...I Generally Let Things Develop Slowly' in *Andreas Gursky, Fotografien 1994-1998*, (Cantz Verlag, 1998), <http://www.postmedia.net/999/gursky.htm> (accessed January, 2009).

¹⁵⁴ Peter Galassi, 'Gursky's World' in *Andreas Gursky*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2001), 25.

appearance of such a remarkable view produces a distinct sensation of a double vantage, that is, an experience of viewing an objective looking-glass world accompanied by a peculiar sensation of watching oneself from the outside.¹⁵⁵ Essentially, the viewer is faced with an anamorphic mirror image of oneself, appearing to coexist in an environment from which he or she is only a miniscule actor, radically defamiliarising our experience of being in the world. The effect is in perfect accord with what Benjamin had demanded of Surrealist photography, over 75 years ago: “a salutary estrangement between man and his surroundings”.¹⁵⁶ What sort of illumination and detail could this disorienting experience of Gursky’s world provide?

Admittedly, Gursky achieves this estrangement as a result of the materials and equipment that he implements for the realisation of his work. In addition to using a large format view camera for a maximum output of image detail, he sometimes achieves elevated viewpoints by employing cranes or helicopters and frequently manipulates his photographs with the aid of a computer. As a result, his images can range from straightforward representations to highly stylized compositions with varying degrees of abstraction:

You never notice arbitrary details in my work. On a formal level, countless interrelated micro and macrostructures are woven together, determined by an overall organisational principle. A closed microcosm which, thanks to my distanced attitude towards my subject, allows the viewer to recognize the hinges that hold the system together.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ This illusory effect experienced by the spectator, which comprises the sensation of being both “inside and outside” at once, has had a long history and characterises the late 19th century fascination with optical, proto-cinematic devices. See Rosalind Krauss, ‘The Impulse to See’ in *Vision and Visuality* ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), 58.

¹⁵⁶ One might add that Benjamin made this claim in direct response to the uncanny emptiness found in Atget’s deserted streets of Paris: “It is in these achievements that Surrealist photography sets the scene for a salutary estrangement between man and his surroundings. It gives free play to the politically educated eye, under whose gaze all intimacies are sacrificed to the illumination of detail.” Walter Benjamin, ‘A Small History of Photography’, in *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London, New York: Verso, 2006), 251.

¹⁵⁷ Veit Görner, ‘...I Generally Let Things Develop Slowly’ in *Andreas Gursky, Fotografien 1994-1998*, (Cantz Verlag, 1998), <http://www.postmedia.net/999/gursky.htm> (accessed January, 2009).

The concept comprising Gursky's "distanced attitude" needs some clarification here, and should not be confused with the actual physical distance between the camera and the subject that is literally recorded in his photographs:

Space is very important for me but in a more abstract way, I think... Maybe to try to understand not just that we are living in a certain building or in a certain location, but to become aware that we are living on a planet that is going at enormous speed through the universe. For me it's more a synonym. I read a picture not for what's really going on there, I read it more for what is going on in our world generally.¹⁵⁸

Gursky's distanced attitude serves to show a totalizing view. From the viewpoint of an observer of contemporary culture, he attempts to display everything that is done by all people, as well as that which affects people everywhere, in order to reveal a more concrete view of a world economic order; the subject matter which remains at the core of his work despite the exaggerations of his digital interventions. For example, to achieve seemingly infinite, wider vistas, Gursky often photographs multiple views of a single subject and then combines them using digital imaging technologies. As a retouching tool, he may subtract arbitrary details or stretch the image to achieve a more correct linear perspective, appropriate for his montages. What is paramount here and, furthermore, reinforces the affinity to Benjamin, is that however elaborate Gursky's practice becomes for the realisation of each photograph, he is ultimately committed to the communicability of real experience and not mere illusion:

Even if a picture is completely invented or built, it's necessary that you could imagine that it's a realistic location or place. I am not happy if the

¹⁵⁸ Nancy Tousley, 'Andreas Gursky: Interview With Insight, Vancouver Art Gallery May 30 to September 20, 2009', *Canadian Art Magazine*, <http://www.canadianart.ca/online/features/2009/07/09/andreas-gursky/> (accessed September, 2009). The conceptual understanding of Gursky's "distanced attitude" may be found in the following excerpt, from the introductory essay to August Sander's 'Face of Our Time' by Alfred Döblin. Döblin wrote in 1929: "...viewed from a certain distance, distinctions vanish; viewed from a certain distance, individuals cease to exist, and only universals persist. The distinction between the individual and the collective (or the universal), then... becomes a matter of varying degrees of distance. ...the distance conferred by a scientific viewpoint or a historical viewpoint, or a philosophical or economic one, would be sufficient." Alfred Döblin, 'Faces, Images, and Their Truth' in *August Sander, Face of Time*, (Munich: Schirmer Art Books, 2003) 11.

picture looks completely surreal. Even if I am working with montage, I want that you don't see it.¹⁵⁹

Gursky's distanced attitude, the preference for scaling down the proportion of human figures in his pictures, in addition to his digital interventions for expanding space do not operate for the sake of artifice, but to bring forth a more comprehensive view of the socioeconomic situation in our time. For example, in addition to rendering human figures microscopic, whenever he photographs masses of people, they merge to become inseparable from the broader social and economic environments in which they find themselves. The photographs are similar in manner to Atget's early series of street traders, which were strictly aimed to depict a generic role as opposed to the personality of any particular individual; a consequence of which is to disclose for us now, a clearer image of labour and commodities in his time.¹⁶⁰ Accordingly, whenever Gursky depicts masses of people in various generic roles such as patrons in night clubs, spectators of sporting events, brokers in stock-exchanges, tourists in ski resorts, and so on, he is actually providing a panoptic view that reveals the process of commodification in any one of the following sectors that make up society in late capitalism: mass production

¹⁵⁹ Nancy Tousley, 'Andreas Gursky: Interview With Insight, Vancouver Art Gallery May 30 to September 20, 2009', Canadian Art Magazine, <http://www.canadianart.ca/online/features/2009/07/09/andreas-gursky/> (accessed September, 2009). Gursky maintains that the special relationship between photography and its referent is not nullified on account of his use digital imaging technologies. Although Gursky often subjects reality to underlying concepts, ultimately, he does not consider his photographs to be inventions. See Beate Söntgen, 'On the Edges of the Event: Echoes of the Nineteenth Century in Andreas Gursky's Series F1 Pit Stop', in the exhibition catalogue *Andreas Gursky, Kunstmuseum Basel*, (Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2008), 66: note 6.

¹⁶⁰ One may add that the portraits of August Sander's "Faces of Our Time" also function in this similar manner, that is, from a social viewpoint the photographs aim to depict far more than the character of individual people, but rather, a broader image of the collective in his time.

and consumption, mass tourism, mass media, mass transit, etc.¹⁶¹ In accordance with postmodern cultural theory, the “masses” in our contemporary culture that Gursky depicts in his photographs should not be confused with the lifestyle of a homogeneous group of individuals or simply the “people” that Atget had documented in his major motif “the street and everyday life of the townspeople”.¹⁶² For most of us in the Western world, our lives today are increasingly being regimented according to a fast paced, overwhelming, and often alienating urban environment that is characteristic of the congested cities in which we each happen to live, in addition to a way of life that is increasingly becoming based on sheer consumption, transcending all boundaries of social class.¹⁶³ The tourists, patrons or spectators comprising the masses in Gursky’s world essentially function as key actors or attributes of an explicitly structured market share. Whether seemingly passive participants or active contributors, in one way or another, Gursky’s masses are but a mere object within an economic process that is so overpowering, that it literally as well as visually overshadows their individual existence in monumental proportions.

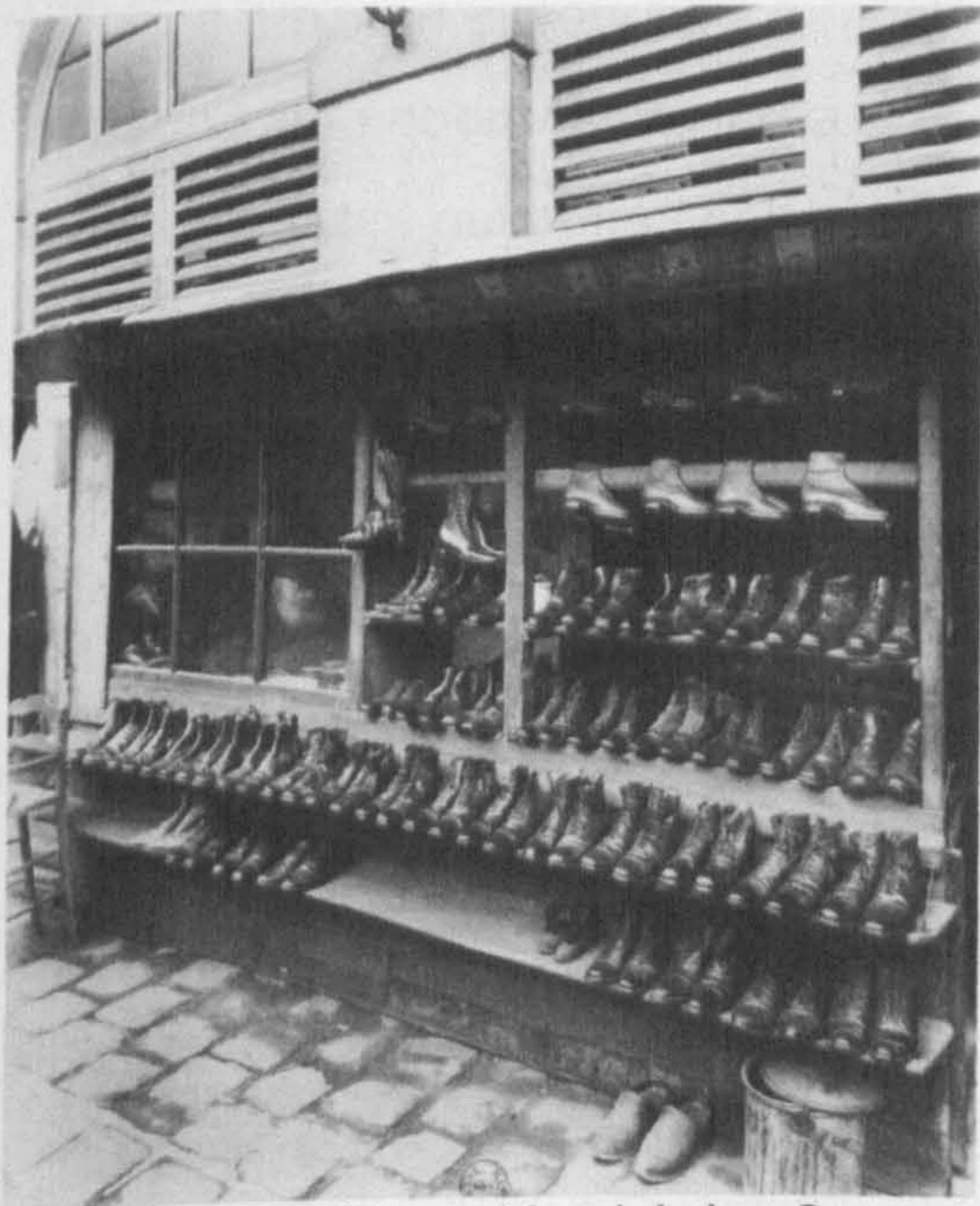
¹⁶¹ Frederic Jameson has described society in late capitalism thus: “...in postmodern culture, ‘culture’ has become a product in its own right; the market has become a substitute for itself and fully as much a commodity as any of the items it includes within itself: modernism was still minimally and tendentially the critique of the commodity and the effort to make it transcend itself. Postmodernism is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process.” Frederic Jameson, *Introduction to Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (London, New York: Verso, 1991), p. x, introduction.

¹⁶² Nina Zimmer’s analysis is helpful here in grasping the difference between the “masses” of our present-day society and the “people” of Atget’s pre-modern world: “The concept of ‘the masses’... is a phenomenon that only emerged in the full bloom of the twentieth century’s industrialized capitalism. However, this concept no longer has any bearing on the hypercapitalism of today’s globalized society... We are bound together by our consumption of globally marketed products, which at the same time lend us the very individuality by which we distinguish ourselves from ‘others’ – there is no escape from the vicious circle of individualization.” Nina Zimmer, ‘Pyongyang: A State of Exception’ in the exhibition catalogue *Andreas Gursky, Kunstmuseum Basel*, (Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2008), 82.

¹⁶³ One might note that Gursky’s photograph of the discount supermarket “99 Cent” essentially encapsulates a consumer fantasy for the poor, by showing “abundance for the underprivileged”, classes of society. See Rudolf Schmitz, “Nothing Over 99 Cents Ever” or, *The Consumer Society as Divine Comedy* in the exhibition catalogue, *Andreas Gursky, Architecture*, (Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2008), 53. (Institut Mathildenhöhe Darmstadt, May 11 – September 7, 2008.)

How truly accurate is Gursky's imaging of modern life in regard to historical truth and furthermore, how exaggerated is the claim that Gursky's work projects the future fate of all places in the world, as we know it? Only if we are prepared to evaluate capitalism as a historic condition that is continually evolving through time, and only if we consider the world as an interconnected patchwork in various stages of development can we truly appreciate Gursky's exaggerations of our present-day environment and begin to associate its implications with the future. According to Benjamin, a photographed image documenting the world, and particularly an old one, had the remarkable power to reveal, instantaneously, an image of the future depending on the viewer's position in time. It is here that it is most appropriate to implement Benjamin's radical model of the dialectic image and to allow the evidence from the past and the present to emerge and "collide", as he had expressed it. In my attempt to show capitalism as a historic condition, I will once again briefly compare photographs of related themes from the present and recent past. More specifically, I would like to compare the physical traces of capitalism as it becomes apparent through the passing of nearly a century of time, by juxtaposing two specific examples taken from both Atget's and Gursky's work. From a socioeconomic viewpoint, I will utilise the visual evidence from each photograph to underline the critical changes over time. In relation to Atget's photograph, my objective is to critically evoke an image of the future time that has come. And to demonstrate how Gursky's illustration of modern life in the late 20th century is not only accurate in respect to historical truth, but also faithful in depicting the phenomena of a universally shared history, which pertains to virtually all places in the entire world.

The first comparison comprises photographs related to the subject of labour: Eugène Atget's "In Carmes Market, Place Maubert", 1910-1911 and Andreas Gursky's *Nha Trang*, 2004. [See Images 2.5 & 2.6]



2.5 Eugene Atget, *Marché des Carmes, Place Maubert, 1911.*

As discussed in Part I, Atget's photograph depicts a shoemaker peering through the window of his shop, while a generous quantity of his wares is arrayed outdoors on the sidewalk. A picture such as this may be said to capture accurately, the most archaic and direct relationship between labour and production. That is to say, shoemakers along with craftsmen of all kinds felt personally accountable for what they made, and they were accustomed to trading the products of their labour directly to prospective buyers. Accordingly, it was a process that in turn, provided an immediate social interaction between individual buyers and sellers. Essentially, Atget's photograph of 1910 is part and parcel of a bygone world comprised of artisans, guilds and journeymen, which was characteristic of a diminishing, merchant phase of capitalism. His photograph manages to document a mode of production that was undergoing a rigorous process of transformation, which will soon be made more concrete, yet was still common at this time.

Gursky's *Nha Trang*, on the other hand, is a photograph about mass production. More specifically, it is an image concerning "industrialised handicraft", which was taken in the interior of the Rapexco Corporation; a

production plant employing 6,500 female workers who weave baskets and chairs in Vietnam.¹⁶⁴ Gursky's illustration of this particular mode of production manages to summarise successfully, the tremendous effect on the future of all individual buyers and sellers in regard to their connection with the actual process of production. His elevated view of the manufacturing facility transforms the workers into an anonymous and unified mass; figures so obscured, that if it weren't for the bright colour of their uniforms, would barely be distinguishable from the material clutter in their surroundings. In relation to labour, Gursky here sets out to make totalising image of globalisation, which is the most recent phase of capitalism that is known for increasing the mobility of labourers and capital, in addition to alienating the experience of work within the process of production. There is no doubt that the difference between Atget's shoemaker and the situation in *Nha Trang* is great. For these anonymous workers in Vietnam, the toil of their labour is actually a chair known by the name of "Agen", which is branded by the popular Swedish furniture company Ikea, and distributed in mass to prospective buyers in virtually all parts of the western world.¹⁶⁵

The second comparison comprises photographs of residential architecture: Eugene Atget's *Courtyard, 41 rue Broca, Paris, 1912* and Andreas Gursky's *Paris, Montparnasse, 1993*. [See Images 2.7 & 2.8] Atget had photographed this particular site, which comprises a specimen of vernacular French architecture because according to his own hand-written inscription on the

¹⁶⁴ The media images that actually inspired Gursky to produce this photograph were sourced, first, from the news magazine "Stern" (published in April, 2003), which published a double page spread highlighting this particular company, and second, from the official Raxpeco company website. Both sources featured spectacular elevated views, similar in perspective to Gursky's *Nha Trang*. See Alfred Nordmann, 'The Murmuring of Fullness' in *Andreas Gursky, Architecture*, (Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2008), 88.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.



2.7 Eugene Atget, *Courtyard, 41 rue Broca, Paris, 1912.*

back of the picture, it was scheduled for demolition.¹⁶⁶ It depicts a typical courtyard of a classic Parisian townhouse at the turn of the century. The carpet hanging from the central window together with the presence of the miniscule figures emerging from the upper floor on the right, all contribute effectively to the illustration of a lived in space, in addition to the claustrophobic living conditions of the Parisian working class at the turn of the century. For the contemporary viewer, an image such as this also reveals something critical about the fundamental problem of space underlying the practices of modern urban development; namely, that gentrification calls for nothing else but a complete destruction of the old to make room for more modern trends in architecture design.

¹⁶⁶ Atget's annotation on the rear side of the photograph reads, "is going to disappear". The image belongs to the holdings of the Musee Carnavalet and was presented by curator Françoise Reynaud in the documentary series *The Genius of Photography*. (Also see p. 60, note 75.) *The Genius of Photography*, Episode 2 (BBC, 2008), 25:20.

Within these modern trends, urban life becomes radically transformed indeed, however, the actual improvement in living conditions together with the measure of all that is ultimately sacrificed is a contestable matter. In fact, with respect to being spatially cramped and confining environments, evidence shows that the oppressive character of working class residential architecture was to grow increasingly more crowded and menacing with the passing of time. Gursky's *Paris, Montparnasse* depicts a model of such modern postwar architecture, which was designed to cater to the functional needs of an ever-increasing population of the urban centre.¹⁶⁷ Gursky seeks to monumentalise the presence of this type of architecture in his photograph. His elevated and

distant perspective, which crops both ends of the building to achieve an exaggerated and seemingly endless view, comprises a visual experience that is not possible to any pedestrian who finds himself walking about the actual space in Paris. Ironically, the location in Gursky's photograph marks the same arrondissement of Atget's studio and living quarters at the turn of the century, where the demolition of countless examples of classic Parisian townhouses

¹⁶⁷ "Immeuble d'habitation Main-Montparnasse II" was built between 1959 and 1968 by Jean Dubuisson. It comprises 750 apartments with 2,000 residents and is considered the single largest residential building in Paris. Gursky constructed the photograph from two different angles at an elevated position from an opposing hotel building, but compiled multiple sections of many more views that were captured in the course of a half-day, in order to increase the array of residents who happened to change positions in the windows. See Ralf Beil, 'Just What Makes Gursky's Photos So Different, So Appealing?' in *Andreas Gursky, Architecture*, (Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2008), 10.

were to suffer a similar fate, as a result of the prevailing interests of state and contemporary market forces comprising the processes of gentrification. What's more, it would not be an over-generalisation to conclude, that it is in fact a structured network comprised of government officials, real-estate agents, property developers, architects, and others who work in tandem, which literally clears the way for numerous architecture similar in character, albeit less superlative to Gursky's residential block, in all cities of the modern world.

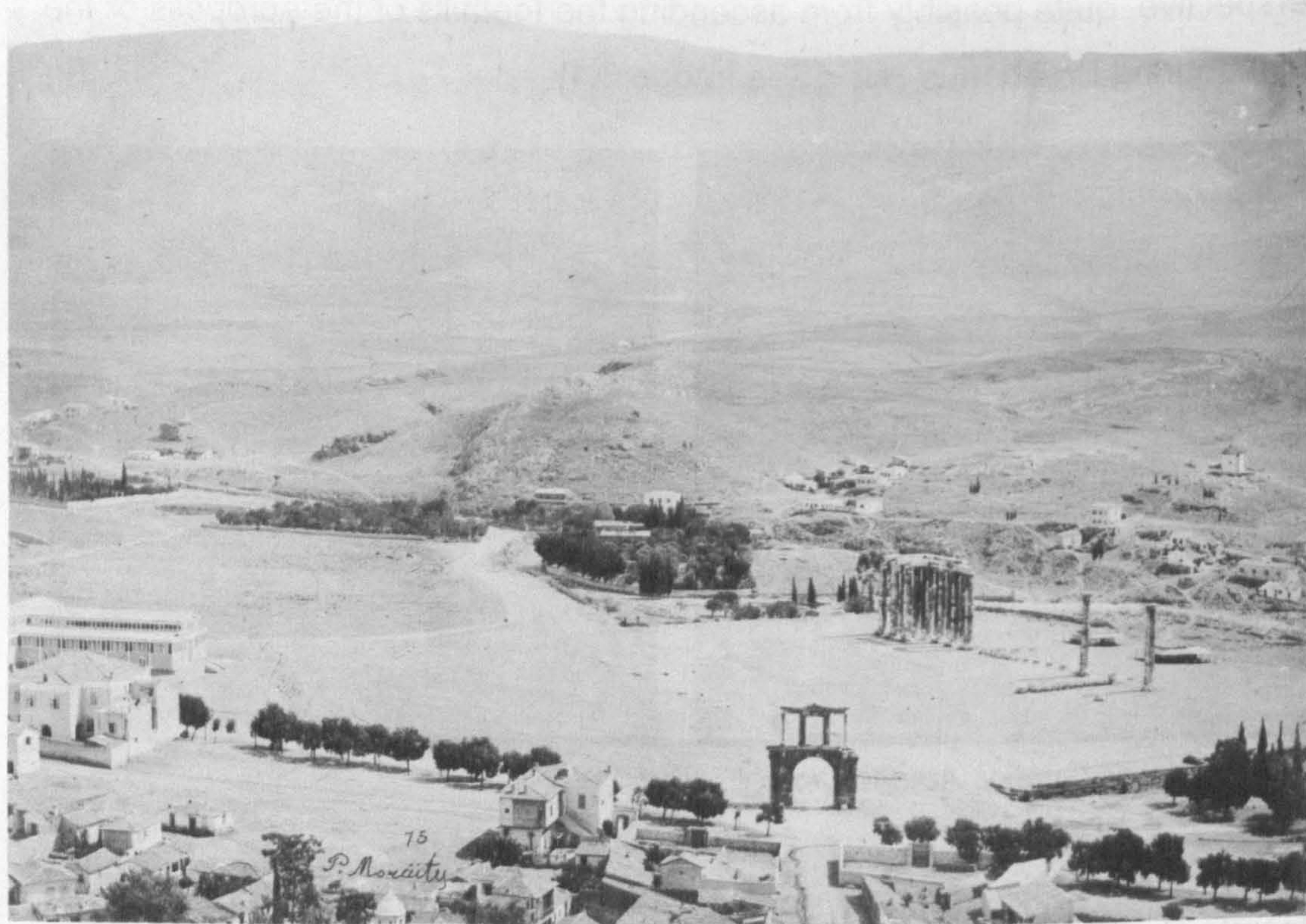
Through the work of Atget and Benjamin, I have attempted to illustrate throughout these chapters how the economic forces of Modernity in Paris have been both a source of cultural practice as well as criticism. In the present-day, Gursky's work effectively maps out for us how these economic forces transform landscapes all over the world, exceeding the boundaries of any designated city. The city of Athens, which is the subject of my interest, has not escaped Gursky's international itinerary as a destination to make one more photograph about modern life. The following chapter will open with this particular photograph, as I begin to introduce my own documentation on the landscape of this modern metropolis.

PART III: Modern Athens

In 1995, Gursky travelled to Greece to make a photograph. *Athens, Diptych* comprises two nocturnal scenes of the capital, captured from an elevated perspective, quite possibly from ascending the foothills of the Acropolis or the neighbouring Lycabettus Hill. [See Image 3.1]

Despite Gursky's preference for sharp definition and graphic detail, his depiction of Athens renders an unintelligible view of the city. According to the photographer himself, even native Athenians have expressed uncertainty about what they are actually seeing: where the camera was situated, in

addition to the direction comprising each view.¹⁶⁸ It is impossible to recognise the specific buildings, or identify any of the streets or squares, since perception and orientation become obscured by the high contrast rendering of the image. Moreover, in the middle ground of both photographs, various streaks together with bright spots of condensed light appear to recede faintly into the background as far as the eye can see, at the moment that an eerie glow rises above the horizon, transforming the entire scene into a kind of satellite view or imagery denoting a binocular device that enhances night-vision. It may be that Gursky had an analogous precedent in mind when he proceeded to make such a photograph of the city. Perhaps not surprisingly, the preference for such an abstract representation of Athens was in response to the overwhelming density of its actual landscape.



3.2 Petros Moraitis, *View from the Acropolis, facing southeast, 1870.*

¹⁶⁸ Cited in Peter Galassi, 'Gursky's World' in *Andreas Gursky*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2001), 43: note 60.

Less than a century and a half ago, virtually none of the construction that is depicted in Gursky's photograph would have been visible. Evidence from the early images of Greek pioneer photographers such as Petros Moraitis reveals a different landscape, one that, except for antiquities and a few scattered houses, was more or less an empty terrain.¹⁶⁹ [See Image 3.2] Taken around 1870 from the Acropolis looking southeast, the land that is depicted in Moraitis' photograph has today in the 21st century, become densely built right up to the foothills of the facing Mt. Hymettus, and yet here, it appears to be unusually barren and rural. Moreover, if Gursky's image portrays a chaotic urban landscape, then Moraitis' photograph is the evidence of nothing more than a provincial town. What has accounted for such a drastic transformation?

All of my photographic work documenting the city of Athens has been, foremost, in response to this rapid as well as massive transformation of its landscape. What's more, the peculiarity of Athens lies in fact that as it appears today, the landscape of the ancient city exclusively has been the product of the recent 19th century. Not long ago it was only a small town comprising a few thousand residents, but an explosion of the city's growth over the last century has resulted in a congested modern metropolis, which now accommodates millions. Apparently Gursky produced his photograph of Athens as a metaphor for capitalism. His imaging of the ancient city reduced to a futuristic expanse of city lights visually summarises the frenzy of economic development that continues to shape the Athenian landscape to this

¹⁶⁹ Petros Moraitis (1832-1890) is considered one of the most important pioneer photographers of Greece. Trained as a painter, he opened the first photographic studio of Athens in 1859, where he photographed artists and politicians, in addition to various anonymous subjects ranging from soldiers, klephts or brigands from the revolution, to the wealthy classes of the bourgeoisie in his time. In 1868 he was appointed the official photographer to the royal family. From 1861 he systematically photographed antiquities, landmarks and traditional costumes throughout all of Greece, essentially documenting in this way, the physiognomy of Greece as a country in transformation that was recovering from Turkish rule and passing into European sentiment. See Alkis X. Xanthakis, *I Elada Tou 19ou Eona Me To Fako Toy Petrou Moraiti [Greece in the 19th Century Through the Lens of Petros Moraitis]*, (Athens: Potamos Publishers, 2001).

day. At this moment in time, is the landscape of the nation's capital nothing more than an evolution of the unfolding, world historical processes of capitalism? To explore the answer to this question and to introduce how such an inquiry has influenced the imaging of the city in my own photographic work, I will once again look back to Modernity in the 19th century as a time marking rapid changes for society in the western world, in order to examine how Athens was actually *made*. Throughout my research, I have specifically approached the city as a modern construct, whereby contemporary economic forces have the enormous power to create, destroy and reinvent environments. Accordingly, all of my photographic work comprises a criticism of the Athenian landscape as such, questioning the workings and reworking of economic powers that have been shaping it historically, inasmuch as continuously, throughout periods over time.

In addition to travelling around and discovering the city visually, the act of collecting and the study of old photographs have been central to my practice. More specifically, Moraitis' photograph of 1870 is a treasured example in a personal collection of vintage images, which comprises views of Athens from the 19th and early 20th century.¹⁷⁰ Topographical in scope, in the eyes of the contemporary viewer most of these views will depict a city with an urban space that is strikingly empty. Consequentially, each image performs the function of a document precisely in the way that was inspired by Benjamin: inviting historical reflection by means of a dialectical image, that is to say, a clash between the present and the past. Albumen prints, collotypes, postcards, in addition to magic lantern slides, stereoscopic photographs and gravures; all of which document the early landscape of Athens are

¹⁷⁰ Moriatis' photograph is a prime example of the impersonal documentary work produced at this time, which was attributed to a growing interest in landscape. In his book *History of Greek Photography 1939-1960*, Alkis Xanthakis has described the period of 1850-1874 thus: "Throughout this period photography of all kinds was a static art; it confined itself to copying reality. Photographers were interested in landscapes, antiquities, and architectural subjects, all of which were approached with a cold and impersonal objectivity." Alkis X. Xanthakis, *History of Greek Photography 1939-1960*, [English version], (Athens: Hellenic Literary and Historical Archives Society, 1988), 96.

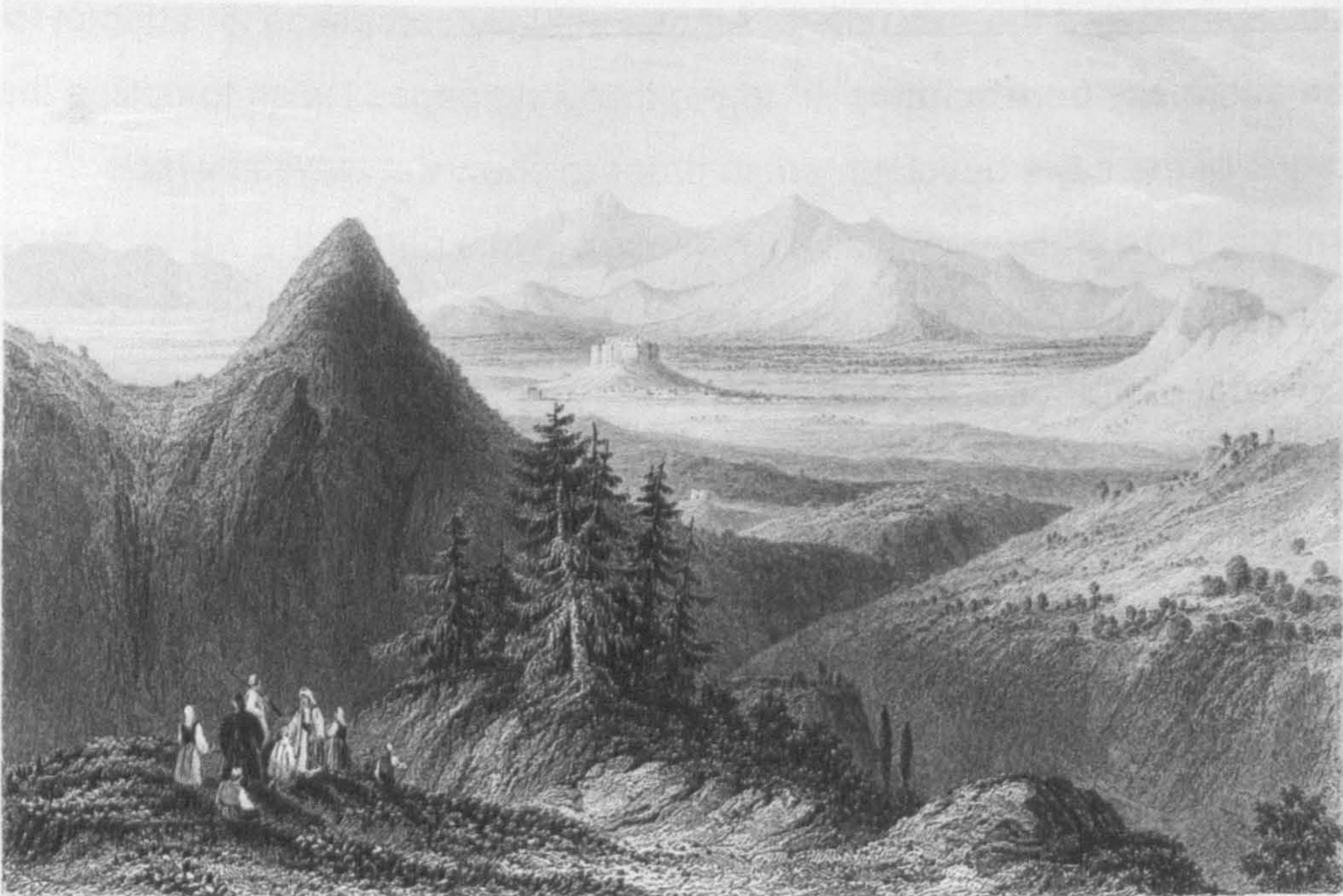
instrumental in revealing incrementally over time, not only the phases of its rapid development but also, in a literal sense, a city in the making. Moreover, in contrast to the example of Paris in the 19th century, and the policies of Baron Haussmann to transform the existing city into a modern metropolis, I have discovered that the example of Athens actually comprises an attempt to build an entire city from scratch.¹⁷¹ In the following pages I wish to outline the key stages of the city's development in order to show the ways in which Modernity in the 19th century was experienced in this part of the world. A brief look at a careful selection of this vintage imagery documenting the physiognomy of the nation's capital within the landscape should suffice to reveal precisely how the ancient city of Athens on the whole, remarkably, has been nothing short of a recent, modern construct.

In the year 1834, when Athens was officially selected to become the capital of a newly established independent Greek state, it comprised no more than 10,000 inhabitants.¹⁷² Moreover, the consequences of the recent war for liberation had resulted in its complete ruination. Apart from its heritage and

¹⁷¹ To offer a broader view, one might also point out that the nation of Greece, as it is presently known as a sovereign, democratic republic has been established only recently, as well as progressively. Historically, the liberation of certain parts of Greece from over four centuries of Ottoman rule was first finalised in the early 19th century through a direct intervention by the Great Powers of Britain, France and Russia. This can be evidenced in the "London Protocol of 1830", which specifically declared "the independence of Greece, under a monarchy and determined the borders of the country", and subsequently in the "Treaty of Constantinople" (1832). The remaining territories, which comprise the current borders of the nation as we know it, would not be liberated until the end of the First World War. See "London Protocol" from the Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs website: http://www.mfa.gr/NR/rdonlyres/E1DA0D5F-5493-4BF4-8FD3-D5CD6C6BB96C/0/1830_london_protocol.doc. (accessed, October 2009).

¹⁷² From my own research, all sources indicate a range between 10,000 and 12,000 to be the approximate population of the city for this time. The best account has been cited by Leonidas Kallivretakis, urban historian for the Institute for Neohellenic Research, who has claimed that, "The exact number of inhabitants is difficult to determine, but all of the indicators, nonetheless, suggest that the number was in the range of 10,000. In October 1824, during the Goura commandership, a census of revolutionary Athens took place, according to which the City had 9,040 inhabitants and 1,605 houses, divided into 35 parishes." See Leonidas Kallivretakis, 'Athens in the 19th Century: From Regional Town of the Ottoman Empire to Capital of the Kingdom of Greece', National Hellenic Research Foundation (EIE) website: http://www.eie.gr/archaeologia/En/chapter_more_9.aspx (accessed, October 2009).

the romantically sonorous name of the city, the harsh reality was that Athens at this time was a destroyed city, which was reduced to nothing more than a "massive heap of rubble."¹⁷³ An engraving from 1839 depicting a broad view of the landscape will reveal the scale of the new capital at this critical period of



Athens from Mount Hymettus.

3.3 Captain Irton, *Athens from Mount Hymettus*, 1839. (Engraver: E. Radclyffe.)

¹⁷³ Kallivretakis gives a concrete image of the city and its destruction through the eyewitness accounts of foreigners arriving in Athens at this time: "The descriptions of Athens after the misadventures of the liberation war, however, are truly disheartening. In August 1832, Ludwig Ross exclaimed: 'This is not the violet-crowned and famous Athens. This is just a massive heap of rubble, a shapeless gray mass of ash and dust, from which emerge a dozen or so palm and cypress trees, the only things opposing a universal desolation'. Around the same time (1832-1833) J.L. Lacour, part of the expeditionary force of General Maison, visited Athens: 'The heart tightens on arriving in Athens. New ruins cover the ancient, which are buried in the earth ... Narrow, dark, muddy, erratic paths. Filthy, sooty and foul-smelling shops, with goods that would be held in contempt even by the traveling merchants at our village festivals, and all of this surrounded by a crude wall, have replaced the Odeon of Perikles, the Elefsinion, the Lyceum, the Gardens and the Temple of Aphrodites, the Gates of Hermes, ...and other monuments, whose names alone have remained'. The Regency member Georg Maurer, who arrived in Athens in 1833, during the first visit by Othon, notes: 'Athens, which before the War of Liberation numbered around 3.000 houses, now has not even 300. The others have turned into a shapeless heap of rocks'. While Thomas Abbet-Grasset observed in October 1834: 'There is no longer an Athens. In the place of this beautiful democracy today there spreads a shabby small town, black from smoke, a silent guardian of dead monuments, with narrow and irregular pathways'. Ibid.

its modern history. [See Image 3.3]

In terms of perspective, the engraving *Athens from Mount Hymettus* discloses the direct opposite-facing view of Moraitis' photograph, providing a truly comprehensive view of the city together with its surrounding landscape. Far away in the distance protrudes the sacred hill of the Acropolis, while a schematic rendering of the city's perimeter lies concentrated in its foothills. The image illustrates the distinct morphology of the land. For the contemporary viewer, and especially for anyone familiar with Athens, the engraving generates a dialectic and telling image of why empty space is presently at a premium. The broader Attica region where the ancient city is situated is actually confined in all directions by three separate mountain ranges and the sea, attributing to its congestion.¹⁷⁴ Despite the impressionistic rendering and any minor inaccuracies, the engraving provides a retrospective view of the space that would accommodate the future capital city of modern Athens, which in 1839 was only on the threshold of reconstruction and modernisation. From a geopolitical viewpoint, what was generally at issue is a nation breaking away from a dark past of colonization and beginning anew through a welcoming of European influence for a more just and prosperous future.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ The engraving presents some degree of imprecision in regard to particular geological features. For example, approximately equal in size to the Acropolis is the neighbouring Lycabettus Hill, which should appear towards its right. However it is either completely omitted, or, should we consider the narrow peak on the right edge to be the Lycabettus, it appears to be greatly distorted. The hill is not a continuation of a mountain range as it appears in the engraving. Today, the foothills of the Lycabettus are comprised of a densely built landscape. Construction has expanded upwards to reach midway all around the entire circumference of the hill, and is considered to be prime property in the real estate market for its splendid views across the city.

¹⁷⁵ For a detailed historical account of the influence of Western European Powers in Modern Greek politics see the chapter 'Europe in Greece', in J. S. Koliopoulos and Thanos M. Veremis, *Greece The Modern Sequel: From 1821 to the Present* (London: Hurst & Company, 2002), pp. 283-298. More specifically, what was at issue is the creation of a new liberal nation-state, which would be organized according to "the establishment of a modern polity similar to those of which examples were already in operation in the West." *Ibid.*, 289.

According to the Greek architect and urban geographer Ioannis Tsiomis, modern Athens is an invention. Practically, through the individual architects and engineers who would intervene in its making, the city as a whole was built according to a larger conceptual plan. Through the construction of classically inspired architecture, the idea was to build a city which would serve as a living embodiment of its own history, in addition to the product of a "European experiment."¹⁷⁶ Prior to reconstruction the nation's capital conveniently comprised of nothing more than a blank canvas, or in essence, a name without a space. Tsiomis emphasises the malleability of this space as it becomes continuously measured out, conceptualised and reconstructed through a mixture of ideologies from ensuing political and market forces. What's more, it is precisely in the "empty" landscape of 19th century Athens in conjunction with the classical era of its history where all the aspirations for prosperity would be invested:

The story of the nation's Capital (Athens) during that period is perhaps the strongest index *that reveals the concretisation of all that is at stake in the game of urban space*. It is also an index of the shifts that occur between the issues of the future, of economic development, of national independence, on the one hand, and the issues regarding the new state ideology on the other. ...And for Greece at the time, these are precisely

¹⁷⁶ Tsiomis uses the term "European experiment" to emphasise the ways in which the history of classical Athens would be used politically, namely by foreign powers, to legitimise the newly formed Greek State. Athens would be transformed into a European capital city precisely through its history, which was studied, analysed and constructed elsewhere. Tsiomis makes reference to the European inspired international style of "Neoclassicism" in conjunction with the New Plan for the city of Athens. More specifically, the architects Kleanthis and Schaubert who had designed the original town plan in 1833 were in fact the former students of prominent neo-classical architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel in Berlin. Subsequently, the plan was revised and re-drafted by the Bavarian architect Leo von Klenze in 1834. Ioannis Tsiomis, 'To Na Milame Gia Tin Athina Tou 1834 Opos Gia Tin Brazilia Tou 1964' ['To Speak of Athens of 1834 as of Brasilia of 1964'] in *I Neoliniki Poli [The Modern Greek City]*, ed. Gu Bourzel (Athens: Exantas, 1989), 21.

the conditions in which space may become modern, efficient and, on occasion, industrial and capitalistic.¹⁷⁷

For Athens, 19th-century Modernity, the subject occupying Benjamin's most productive and final years in Paris, would be a time of even greater radical transition. This is because as the capital of a new nation, modernisation corresponded to creating not only a contemporary Greek State but also a new economy. This can be evidenced through much of what was established by the end of the 19th century: the construction of a town plan together with neo-classical civic architecture, the introduction of industry and the circulation of goods, the establishment of financial institutions such as a bank system together with a tax system, and finally and most importantly, through antiquity and the weight of its history, a national identity that would warrant a future cultural exchange amongst nations. According to the view of American urbanist Anthony M. Tung, the transformation of Athens during the 19th century was nothing less than astounding:

The prerevolutionary city had been a medieval military outpost with little infrastructure and a circulation system that accommodated only pedestrians and horses. The postrevolutionary city however, would mirror the form of the industrialized capitals of the developed nations of Europe and America. The prerevolutionary town of several thousand inhabitants had evolved organically over many centuries; the postrevolutionary metropolis would accommodate a modern urban society and be planned by professional engineers and architects trained in Germany. Through the European-trained professionals serving the Bavarian-born king, the classical influence would be rerouted in its journey from ancient Greece to Imperial Rome, to Italy during the

¹⁷⁷ (Emphasis original), translation from the original text in Greek by Miltos Frangopoulos.) Ibid. 20. Interestingly enough, the dilemmas in regard to governance facing the founding fathers of the contemporary Greek State in 1834 is not without precedent. In antiquity, Plato had hypothesised the challenges of searching out a polity for ancient Athens by laconically writing thus: "...he who has a mind to establish a State, as we have been doing, must go to a democracy as he would to a bazaar at which they sell them, and pick out the one that suits him; then, when he has made his choice, he may found his State." See Plato, *The Republic, Book VIII*, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.9.viii.html> (accessed December 2009).

Renaissance, to Bavaria, and back to the capital of the aspiring modern nation.¹⁷⁸

During the time of Modernity, the Greek capital was transformed into a “dreamed city” that was influenced by the magnificence of the classical era. Through its architecture and the revival of Classicism, what Athens would achieve by design is to advocate its ancient heritage to the entire world. By means of a rational street pattern together with an archaeological park, the city was planned to function harmoniously around its ancient monuments.

Historical circumstances had created a climate in which there was wide agreement that the ruins of ancient Athens were sacrosanct. For the Europeans, their very involvement in Greek affairs arose from a desire to see the cradle of Western civilisation back within the Western sphere of influence. For the Greeks, who for centuries had been hobbled by foreign domination, the classical era was a heritage with which the new nation could feel proud to identify. Thus, it was generally settled that the ancient ruins on the Acropolis would not only be preserved but would to some extent be reclaimed and reconstituted.¹⁷⁹

Planners and architects had the unique opportunity to build a new metropolis on a grand scale.¹⁸⁰ This entire infrastructure was in accordance with the model of a Western European liberal democracy together with a market economy of powerful contemporary forces; which I would like to argue, not only created a beautiful classically inspired modern metropolis from scratch,

¹⁷⁸ Anthony M. Tung, ‘Athens: The City of the Gods Besieged,’ in *Preserving the World’s Great Cities: The Destruction and Renewal of the Historic Metropolis*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 259. For Tung, the classical influence in the construction of Athens has significant similarities with the “master plan” for the city of Rome in 1887. Similar to Rome, Tung claims that through its Neoclassical architecture Athens would be designed with the intent to function as a “living museum” of its own past.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 260. Tung has described the visionary plan of the city thus: “On the plain north of the Acropolis, a street configuration reminiscent of the palace town of Versailles was proposed as the location of the new capital. Here major urban monuments and public spaces were to be located at the junctures of important boulevards and straight, wide avenues. This street pattern, in the Baroque planning style, was devised so that both the central boulevard of Athens and numerous other thoroughfares were aligned to focus on the Acropolis. Thereby were achieved vistas of the hilltop from numerous vantage points throughout the cityscape, ensuring the primacy of its symbolic presence.” Ibid., 261.

¹⁸⁰ Kleanthis and Schaubert had designed the New Plan for a city of 40,000 inhabitants. “For miles in all directions around the Acropolis, an extended agricultural plain provided ample room to build.” Ibid., 260.

but furthermore actively participated in its destruction, and has been transforming it continuously ever since.

The following two photographs, one a panoramic view of the capital and the other an albumen print both dating from the late 1890's, reveal the product of a modern and functional administrative centre subsequent to a half-century of reconstruction. *Panorama of Athens* comprises two consecutive views overlooking the city centre, which together compose an unbroken view of the entire region northeast of the Acropolis in the direction towards Lycabettus Hill.¹⁸¹ [See Image 3.4, *insert*] Distinguishable in the centre of the image are the prominent House of Parliament and the National Cathedral. On the left hand side, a smokestack towering behind the ancient Temple of Theseion in addition to a second one further beyond marks the establishment of industry, such as the gas works at Gazi (1862) and silk processing in Metaxurgio (1855). From the appearance of both views, Athens is beginning to look congested, yet it still remains homogeneous and picturesque. It has a balanced townscape that is unified aesthetically by its architecture.

Throughout the metropolis, in old and new neighbourhoods, developers constructed vernacular residential and commercial buildings influenced by the notable structures of both the ancient and contemporary city. Hundreds of buildings rose up, and even those of modest size and expense were articulated with classically influenced architectural elements and details. The endless variety of these vernacular structures - rarely designed by architects, and often taking their forms from

¹⁸¹ *Panorama of Athens* was originally comprised of three photographs (here the left view is missing) and was photographed by Greek photographer Aristotelis Romaidis. Together with his brother Constantine, Aristotelis specialised in archaeological photography and worked in Athens for the Hellenic Archaeological Society after 1876. The Romaidis brothers were amongst the seven Greeks who participated in The Exposition at Paris in 1878 with enlargements of Athens, Pireaus, the Acropolis, the 'Theseion' and the Theatre of Dionysus, which had been discovered just fifteen years before. Alkis X. Xanthakis, *History of Greek Photography 1939-1960*, [English version], (Athens: Hellenic Literary and Historical Archives Society, 1988), 98, 100.

architectural style books and catalogs - expressed a broad cultural connection with the architectural values of the past.¹⁸²

Taken from the Acropolis by an unknown photographer, the albumen print depicts a closer view surrounding the area of Parliament. [See Image 3.5]

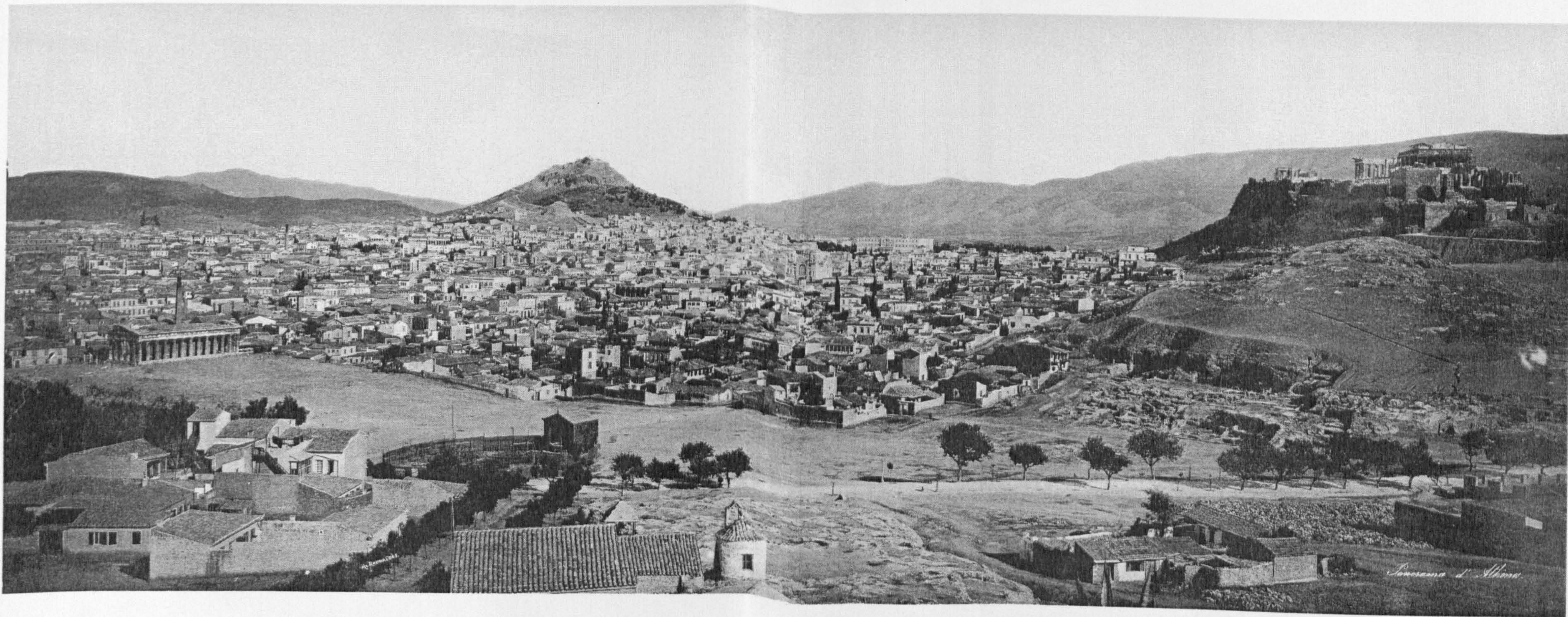
Clearly visible are the uniform, low-rise buildings with terracotta rooftops



3.5 Photographer unknown, *View towards Lycabettus Hill, 1890.*

(insert) 3.4 Aris Rhomaidis, *Panorama of Athens, 1890.*

¹⁸² "From 1839 to 1892, a number of significant public buildings in the Neoclassical style were constructed in the city: the University of Athens, the Academy of Science, and the National Library. Although they would not achieve the pure aesthetic integrity of their ancient Greek predecessors, these new structures made a conceptual bridge between the past and the future." Anthony M. Tung, 'Athens: The City of the Gods Besieged,' in *Preserving the World's Great Cities: The Destruction and Renewal of the Historic Metropolis*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 263.



Sansepolcro d'Albani

comprising the Neoclassical style vernacular.¹⁸³ With a population of approximately 120,000 residents just prior to the turn of the century, the city still remains modest. At this point, while the number of inhabitants has exceeded well beyond the original plan of the new city, spatially its perimeters continue to remain in close vicinity to the Acropolis since construction has yet to extend beyond the foothills of Lycabettus Hill.¹⁸⁴ The albumen print together with Tung's description of Athens at this particular time effectively summarises the city's most favourable period of its modern history:

Athenians of today recall their parents' and grandparents' descriptions of what the city was like when it first blossomed after Greek independence. The predominant low scale of urban construction in those early days allowed the streets to be bathed in sunlight; flowering citrus trees and vegetation were abundant, and the buildings of Athens - those up on the Acropolis, the civic buildings in the important public squares, and the more modest structures of everyday life - drew their forms from a common architectural source rooted in the very land itself. A beautiful and coherent metropolis, unified aesthetically on several levels and crowned by one of the most conspicuous architectural symbols in Western civilisation, had emerged from the chaos of war.¹⁸⁵

Athens was essentially a prospering new city that was on the threshold of the 20th century. In respect to being a functional and modern metropolis, the Greek capital may be comparable to Paris in Atget's time, albeit smaller in

¹⁸³ Kallivretakis describes the popularity of the Neoclassical style vernacular in Athens thus: "...the Neoclassical style in Greece acquired its own dynamic and particularity, the main characteristics of which were its re-immersion in classical models, its wide acceptance, which exceeded the monumental structures and the well-heeled classes to reach the wide mass of the population and, finally, its long persistence, which runs to the interwar period." Leonidas Kallivretakis, 'Athens in the 19th Century: From Regional Town of the Ottoman Empire to Capital of the Kingdom of Greece', National Hellenic Research Foundation (EIE) website: http://www.eie.gr/archaeologia/En/chapter_more_9.aspx (accessed, October 2009).

¹⁸⁴ Kallivretakis has made reference to the original town plan in relation to the rising numbers of the city's population thus: "Its establishment as capital [Athens] understandably instigated a large inflow of new residents. From roughly 12,000 in 1834, the number of residents doubled over the next decade. Still, the expectation of Kleanthis-Schaubert of 40,000 inhabitants did not materialize before the decade of 1860, and the milestone of 100,000 was not passed until the end of the 1880s." Ibid..

¹⁸⁵ Anthony M. Tung, 'Athens: The City of the Gods Besieged,' in *Preserving the World's Great Cities: The Destruction and Renewal of the Historic Metropolis*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 263.

scale. For the future time ahead, can the city of Paris comprise a paradigm of Modernity for Athens, in respect to the urbanisation of its landscape? At this time in the late 1890's, Atget was only just embarking upon his new career in photography, where for the next thirty years he would document the various aspects of city life in the historic quarters of the French capital, which were soon to disappear. For Paris in particular, Modernity would ultimately displace heritage. With the destruction of ancient architecture, long-established neighbourhoods would be sacrificed to redevelopment, whereas in essence, Athens was already a new city. Can the modern history of the two capital cities actually be compared? As a matter of course that I will now begin to illustrate, as with Atget's documentation of Old Paris the majority of architecture that is actually visible in these views today no longer exists. What's more, the photographs comprise what is now considered "Old Athens", or otherwise classified as the official *Historic Centre* in the present time. In a similar manner to Old Paris, all throughout the 20th century countless buildings of great aesthetic and cultural value were gradually destined for demolition on account of the rising national interest in development and commerce. In Athens however, ultimately vernacular architecture was systematically destroyed in order to accommodate not the widening of streets or a new town plan, but rather, in the same narrow streets of the existing plan, new and increasingly larger forms of architecture. Theano Fotiou, architect and lecturer at the Technical University of Athens, illustrates precisely how the city was destined to lose its character irrevocably. Without any form of building regulations whatsoever to protect the city by the state in conjunction with the interests of private enterprise, in a matter of decades the topography of Athens changed rapidly in both size as well as appearance. The example of Parliament Square in the year 1917 is a case in point:

From 1880 to 1890 the population doubles from 65,499 to 123,001 and the city now comprises many new districts – Kipseli, Abelokipi, (...)
The purchase of land outside the city zone increases, while real estate developers carry out unauthorized construction of buildings on various private streets.

These illegal buildings become legalised by political means.

So when the first seven-story structure appears in Parliament Square in 1917, no building regulations exist, nor the legislative acts to control the appearance of Athens. The laws decreeing height would be issued in 1919 and the first General Building Regulations, ten years later.¹⁸⁶

Under the governance of Eleftherios Venizelos (1928-1932), the first General Building Regulations in 1929 lawfully permit the construction of large-scale, multi-story structures to be erected within the small, existing lots of land throughout the city, leaving minimal or no areas whatsoever for natural open space. Triggered by both an enormous inflow of new residents during the inter-war years together with a liberal legislative policy, the multi-story residential block rises to become the predominant architectural archetype in the 20th century; a consequence that Fotiou claims would determine the deadlock not only for Athens, but for all cities throughout Greece.¹⁸⁷ The historians John Koliopoulos and Thanos Veremis provide a broader view by revealing how through the evolution of architecture, the landscape of modern Athens has been influenced visually as well as economically, by dominate international trends:

¹⁸⁶ (My translation from the original text in Greek.) Theano Fotiou, 'Arxitektonika Protypa stin Synxroni Athina: I Periptosi tis Astikis Polykatikias, I Morfologia tis Polis' ['Architectural Prototypes in Contemporary Athens: The Case of the Urban Residential Block, The Morphology of the City'] in *I Neoeliniki Poli [The Modern Greek City]*, ed. Gu Bourzel (Athens: Exantas, 1989), 79.

According to Tung, "Under the Ottomans, the Greeks were not allowed to own land in their own country, so once they won independence, restrictions on the use of private property may have seemed onerous, particularly when imposed initially by foreign (German) administrators. Instead of either adopting a new design or adhering to an old one... administrators simply made a catalogue of the schemes of private real estate investors and the built area of the city was allowed to grow ad hoc. Between 1,878 and 1,900 permits for 173 alterations to the municipal plan were granted to various private developers without public review or oversight." Anthony M. Tung, 'Athens: The City of the Gods Besieged,' in *Preserving the World's Great Cities: The Destruction and Renewal of the Historic Metropolis*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 265.

¹⁸⁷ In the year 1929, the decree 3741/9.1.1929 was issued to provide a new legislative framework for property ownership. Much like the contemporary condominium, it permitted the full title of ownership to an individual flat in a multi-storied residential building, allowing in this way, parts of buildings to be owned by different individuals. Theano Fotiou, 'Arxitektonika Protypa stin Synxroni Athina: I Periptosi tis Astikis Polykatikias, I Morfologia tis Polis' ['Architectural Prototypes in Contemporary Athens: The Case of the Urban Residential Block, The Morphology of the City'] in *I Neoeliniki Poli [The Modern Greek City]*, ed. Gu Bourzel (Athens: Exantas, 1989), 85.

Post-independence architecture can be divided into three periods. First came the neo-classical style imported from the West and adopted to the modest scale of Athenian life. This was followed by the 'neo-vernacular' trend of the 1910's and '20's, drawing from popular tradition, and finally came the full adoption of modernism in the 1930's. A fourth period could be added to include the anonymous large-scale construction activity of the 1950's and '60's.¹⁸⁸

With the gradual disappearance of the small neoclassical house, inevitably the city grows taller and more menacing. Civic life becomes radically transformed. Moreover, future laws will produce a radical change in the way these larger structures are financed, increasing the rate of their construction. While during the inter-war years the residential block is built by individual landowners who were usually affluent members of the upper classes, after the second World War it is built by the method of "antiparochi": a barter system comprising the valuable consideration of land in exchange for a proportion or share of its future development; that is to say, through a rigorous negotiation by which a single flat or any number of units would be prearranged between the landowner and a property developer.¹⁸⁹ The multi-story residential block now becomes a true industry, in addition to the most affordable and practical form of accommodation for the underprivileged masses. From this day forward and perhaps not surprisingly, the entire Athenian landscape becomes one great construction site.

Anni Vrixeia, professor of architecture at the National Technical University of Athens illustrates how after 1950, a massive rise in population leads the city into chaos:

The population from 1,556,000 in 1951 increased within 30 years to 3,369,000. That is, 2,000,000 more people in the city in 30 years. ...People, industry, offices, residences, refuse dumps, and all this

¹⁸⁸ S. Koliopoulos and Thanos M. Veremis, *Greece The Modern Sequel: From 1821 to the Present* (London: Hurst & Company, 2002), 392.

¹⁸⁹ Theano Fotiou, 'Arxitektonika Prototipa stin Synxroni Athina: I Periptosi tis Astikis Polykatikias, I Morfologia tis Polis' ['Architectural Prototypes in Contemporary Athens: The Case of the Urban Residential Block, The Morphology of the City'] in *Neoliniki Poli [The Modern Greek City]*, ed. Gu Bourzel (Athens: Exantas, 1989), 84.

in monumental quantities, were crammed negligibly without any elementary organizational arrangement. With the only criterion and the only axis of direction being the exploitation of land, excessive profit, private enterprise, and individualism.¹⁹⁰

Vrixea argues that Athens is the product of demographic upheaval and cataclysmic urban growth, where the evidence of capitalism now becomes *visible*. It has acquired a clearly visible form that is inscribed throughout the landscape of the city. Its appearance is distinguished by a chaotic organisation of urban space, in addition to a lack of open space.

Tung provides a more explicit view by illustrating how market forces and the exploitation of land would affect the architecture of the city subsequent to 1949:

During this time the city's governance was conspicuous for its corruption and laxity in regard to land-use regulation...widespread deferred maintenance of buildings, shortages of housing for an expanding population, and unchecked speculative development caused Athens to be almost totally rebuilt several stories higher. From that moment to today, at least 50 percent of the new construction in the city has been through illegal development. Existing houses were expanded without permits, and large areas of the city were bartered in a black market in property, and squatters built whole neighbourhoods without complying with official regulations.¹⁹¹

According to Tung, it is due to a general lack of political stability, in conjunction with the unrestrained building practices behind the growing industry of property development which has caused the demise of the

¹⁹⁰ [My translation from Greek] Anni Vrixea, 'Athina: I Poli kai o Dimos Anafora stin Aniparksia Mias Sxesis' ['Athens: The City and its Municipality, Reference to a Nonexistent Relationship'] in *I Neoeliniki Poli [The Modern Greek City]*, ed. Gu Bourzel (Athens: Exantas, 1989), 71.

¹⁹¹ Anthony M. Tung, 'Athens: The City of the Gods Besieged,' in *Preserving the World's Great Cities: The Destruction and Renewal of the Historic Metropolis*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 265.

classically inspired city.¹⁹² Tung summarises the fate of the city in the second half of the 20th century, as it becomes destroyed and reconstructed to accommodate millions of people in a modern society that is continuously changing. He offers a global view, characterising Athens as “one of the more polluted cities in the world” at the present time:

Over the course of this widespread reconstruction, much of the classically inspired vernacular architecture of the beautiful city disappeared. Developers constructed acre upon acre of ugly, poorly made, generic modern buildings. The general increase in the height of the city reduced the amount of sunlight that reached the streets. As the population grew, the number of private motor vehicles proliferated until traffic clogged the city. Since Athens sits in a plain surrounded by higher mountains, it experiences inversions similar to those of Mexico City and Los Angeles. This geographic characteristic, coupled with the historical failure of the Greek government to control industrial pollution in the Athenian basin, and further combined with the dramatic increase in automotive emissions, made Athens one of the more polluted cities in the world.¹⁹³

Through a criticism of architecture and a physiognomic reading of the city, Koliopoulos and Veremis arrive at a similar view of Athens by associating world historic events and a lack of political policy with its rapid development and the menacing appearance of its urban space. Inevitably, the landscape of modern Athens is the product of its modern history.

Modern Athens is the result of unforeseen circumstance – a sleepy village that was rapidly transformed into the capital of a new state. The influx of close to half a million destitute refugees from Asia Minor in 1922, and the unplanned movement after the Second World War of an agrarian population into the bloated centre of a centralised administration, were chaotic. Only a small part of the sprawling city is the result of planning, and its buildings lack the monumental qualities which are found in some other Balkan capitals. Exceptions to the absence of space and dignity are to be found in the area of the Parliament, the National Park, the

¹⁹² “Since Greek independence, continuity in the administration of Athens has been undermined by the recurring political instability caused by fourteen revolutions - including the abolition of the monarchy, its subsequent restoration, and its final abolition in 1973 - as well as a number of military coups d’etat, a brutal period of German occupation followed by a savage civil war, and numerous dissolutions of various parliamentary governments.” Ibid., 265.

¹⁹³ Anthony M. Tung, ‘Athens: The City of the Gods Besieged,’ in *Preserving the World’s Great Cities: The Destruction and Renewal of the Historic Metropolis*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 266.

Presidential Palace, Zappion and the reconstructed ancient stadium. The rest is crammed and crowded, with few buildings of architectural merit.¹⁹⁴

My research, together with the production of my photographic work is a way of making sense of this landscape. It is a matter which is both deeply personal and highly experiential. It is rooted in my own experience of the city, through my neighbourhood, and the dramatic changes that have taken place within my own lifetime. My experience of the city: the paving of dirt roads, the proliferation of automobiles, the construction of tall buildings and the considerable increase in population are all transitions that effect the individual's sense of scale in relation to the environment. Hence, the motivational drive behind the production of this work is located in both translating the loss of memory and the personal maelstrom stemming from these transformations into a broader social concern, and to make photographs that may speak candidly about this new environment.

My photographs are a commentary on the appearance of Athens in the 21st century and the ways in which development has made an impact on its landscape. In addition, it is a documentary work about the social and economic conditions of our time. As I now present several key images of this work, I will outline how my imaging of the city has been influenced by the significance of architecture together with the economic forces that have come into play in shaping the urban landscape. Therefore my imaging of the city is retrospective in scope. I consider the Athenian landscape to be a palimpsest of successive exploitations of the land, where in essence architecture is the manifestation of its modern history. For example, *Sepolia II* is an image concerning property development that visually summarises the method of "antiparochi". [See Image 3.6] The photograph depicts a traditional neoclassical style house, which lies situated amongst a dense backdrop of more recent modern residential architecture. The house shows the evidence

¹⁹⁴ S. Koliopoulos and Thanos M. Veremis, *Greece The Modern Sequel: From 1821 to the Present* (London: Hurst & Company, 2002), 391.

of deterioration and vandalism, while its yard bears signs of neglect. Sites such as this are common throughout many neighbourhoods of Athens. To be sure, it is a matter of time before the property is inevitably levelled and cleared away in order for the construction of a larger structure to take its place. With

this photograph I aim to invite a dialectical view of residential architecture. The image functions as a window into how the city once existed juxtaposed with how it has now become overcrowded through the evolution of architecture. It illustrates the process by which the topography of the city becomes radically transformed.

Analogous in subject to the previous photograph, the image titled *Em. Benaki Street, Athens* depicts two abandoned and crumbling neoclassical buildings that appear overshadowed by a towering mass of modern architecture, at the moment that two human figures are interacting in a car park. [See Image 3.7] The camera's great distance from these figures makes them look small and anonymous, while the surrounding space appears bigger and the buildings more menacing. Compare, for example, Gursky's *Paris, Beaugrenelle* (1988), which depicts a small gathering of people talking on a tennis court. [See Image 3.8] The viewer encounters a rather commonplace setting from a

broad elevated view, where the identity of the people diminishes within the sweeping cityscape. The scene acquires a different significance. The import of the picture is not in connection with a particular moment in time but rather, the substance of the surrounding environment where human activity simply happens to take place. Like a stage, the viewer feels to have observed something tangible and comprehensive about this otherwise ordinary urban scene, in addition to a sensation of viewing something exotic from the point of view of an outsider. The photograph defamiliarises the experience of looking at our own environment. Similar in manner, my view overlooking Benaki Street is comprised of such a stage. The landscape of the city provides the backdrop for the activity of resident-actors who are oblivious to their surroundings, which is the means I have selected to represent present-day Athenian civic life.

I would like to demonstrate how the subject of modern architecture comprises a carefully planned backdrop for several more photographs. It may be said that the most cunning example is *Eleftherios Venizelos, Pireaus*, a subtly ironic image of a statue commemorating the great Greek statesman and leader whose name has become synonymous with the establishment of the modern Greek State, in addition to the turmoil of Modernity at the turn of the century.¹⁹⁵ [See Image 3.9] Situated at the entrance of a public square, the figure of Venizelos stands poised, unsuspecting of the present day realities that his own administration would help to set in motion. He gazes above and beyond the surface of a defaced sidewalk, while behind him a vast wall of unremarkable post-war architecture manifests a colourful array of signage; a common site in Athens which is characteristic of a contemporary consumer

society. Through this opposition between statue and signs, the image is

¹⁹⁵ The leadership of Eleftherios Venizelos (1864 – 1936) is identified with guiding the nation through world historical events such as the Balkan Wars (1912-1913) and the First World War, as well as the Asia Minor catastrophe (1922) and the international Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which resulted in a significant expansion of the nation's borders into how they exist today. On the domestic or interior front, Venizelos was also responsible for a series of major reforms, the most significant being the establishment of the welfare state.

intended to function as a criticism of the Athenian landscape and the course of its modern development.

In another series of photographs, I wish to illustrate the several different ways in which modern architecture has been juxtaposed with antiquities. For example, in the image titled *The Themistoclean Wall, Pireas* the archaeological remains of the ancient fortifications of the city are barely visible. [See Image 3.10] They are sandwiched between the natural rock formations of the coast and the abundance of construction that lies overhead. Situated near the water, there is the inconspicuous figure of a man standing on the rocks and holding a fishing rod. In this broad view, the viewer has difficulty distinguishing the rectilinear fragments that comprise the great ancient wall. Built in the 5th century BC along the many kilometres of coastline, at this particular site a small picturesque harbour provides such an idyllic setting that the waterfront has accumulated an impenetrable mass of residential architecture from one side of the picture frame to another. Filled to capacity, the area surrounding the harbour, in conjunction with the

appearance of the tallest building under construction, manifests a struggle for the ultimate scenic view. The photograph documents the present congestion of the city. But it also aims to suggest how scenic landscapes are continuously measured out, contested and appraised, ultimately putting a high premium on urban space.

The subject of modern architecture and the exploitation of archaeological ruins have influenced the production of two more photographs, which present different implications in connection with the organisation of urban space. The first image aims to demonstrate how the city now capitalises on the land that is both above as well as beneath the surface of Athens, while the second photograph visually summarises the nation's ideology around the subject of

heritage. In *The National Bank of Greece*, antiquities are starkly juxtaposed with institutional architecture. [See Image 3.11] In this photograph, an excavation of ancient ruins is shown merged with the structural foundations of a modern building, integrating into a single landscape. Subdued with artificial lighting, the corporate atmosphere of the vacant entrance together with the

raw textures of the ancient ruins comprises an unearthly and disturbing scene. The nation's heritage is presented completely at one with the cold atmosphere of a financial institution.

In a completely different approach, in the photograph titled *The Acropolis Museum* the construction of monumental modern architecture is presented from a breathtaking aerial view. The crane divides the image in two distinctive parts, separating the timeless landscape of the old city on the right from a group of ant-like workers and a frenzy of construction on the left. In commemoration of the Acropolis, which is the nation's single most treasured monument, the construction of a brand new museum is presented as a phantasmagorical event. It is purposely transformed into a biblical scene of epic dimensions. The reason for such a dramatic representation of this particular subject is because the nation has a vested interest in its cultural heritage. In fact, it has become the basis for its economic future.

The building of the new Acropolis Museum, which is designed by Bernard Tschumi, has not been without controversy. This is related to a decision by the

Central Archaeological Council to approve the de-classification of two previously listed 19th century buildings of great cultural value, one being an example of neoclassical architecture and the other art-deco, which both happen to lie between the new museum and the Acropolis. The decision to tear down the historic buildings, an act that has been prevented up to now, is based on the needs of the museum to ensure visitors an unmediated view to the Acropolis from the museum's cafeteria. In his article 'Archaeology and Hellenic Identity, 1896-2004: The Frustrated Vision,' archaeologist Dimitris Plantzos illustrates how antiquities continually function to legitimize the Greek State to the world. Plantzos makes the following reference to the recent coverage by the press, which summarizes the view of those who support the demolitions:

Besides being a filial duty towards an imposing past, this heterotopic approach to the development of urban landscapes in modern Greece has been understood by Greeks as a way of meeting outsiders expectations of them and a way of achieving international acceptance and financial benefits. In one of the countless texts urging the state to get rid of the two 'unimportant' listed buildings for the sake of the 'common good' written by various 'public intellectuals' catering primarily for the press, we read that 'no [foreign] visitor will come to Athens in order to see an art-deco facade, though many will come for the Acropolis Museum, provided we promote it appropriately.'¹⁹⁶

Such conflicts, which privilege and "promote" the site of the Acropolis should not be surprising. Ever since the 19th century and all throughout Modernity, every aspect of Classical Athens together with its monuments has been beautified and romanticised to the degree of imposing "myth" on society, as Benjamin would have expressed it, fuelling the industry of tourism most profitably ever since. Moreover, "Live your myth in Greece" has been the official catch-phrase comprising the nation's 2005 campaign that was organised by the Ministry of Tourism and the National Tourism Organisation of

¹⁹⁶ Cited in Dimitris Plantzos, 'Archaeology and Hellenic Identity, 1896-2004: The Frustrated Vision' in *A Singular Antiquity: Archaeology and Hellenic Identity in Twentieth Century Greece*, ed. Dimitris Damaskos and Dimitris Plantzos, (Athens: Benaki Museum), 16.

Greece. [See Image 3.13] A brief look at this advert will show how cleverly it has been designed to make the most of the nation's cultural heritage. In the mind of the viewer, the surreal appearance of the illustration leaves no misunderstandings: from an extreme perspective of looking above from below, the word "myth" appears boldly superimposed on a towering ancient temple at the moment that a mermaid is shown swimming in the sky, however, ultimately it is in fact the text of the advert that best reveals how history becomes exploited in order to stimulate the senses and sway prospective visitors:

Greece: a land of mythical dimensions. Where the spirit of hospitality welcomes you as a modern god. And the siren song draws you into deep blue waters. Where a gentle breeze through ancient ruins seems to whisper your name. And a dance until dawn can take on Dionysian proportions. In Greece, the myths are still very much alive. And in amongst them sits your own... patiently waiting for you to live it. Live your myth in Greece. Ask your travel agent.¹⁹⁷

The advert clearly illustrates how an aura of mystery and adventure has been purposely constructed around the nation's past for the sake of increasing tourism. Moreover, through a variety of media such as print ads, billboards

¹⁹⁷ "Ad campaign of Greece abroad for 2005 in 27 countries." (English version for United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia and USA) Image downloaded from the Ministry of Tourism – National Tourism Organization of Greece, <http://www.gnto.gr/pages.php?pageID=878&langID=1> (accessed January 2010).

and television commercials, the campaign was strategically distributed in a host of languages throughout dozens of countries on a global scale. Thus it becomes clear how in the industry of tourism, the economic interests and the objective to dominate in a world market inevitably results in the commodification of culture, for which it seems that the nation cannot help but become a veritable entrepreneur.

The idea of Athens in regard to faceless globalisation is concretised once again through the documentation of its architecture. In this final series of photographs, the anonymous truly large-scale construction of the most recent residential architecture could not escape my imaging of the city for the ways in which it has radically transformed the topography of Athens, in addition to affecting the quality of urban life. In the real-estate market, evidence of this trend together with the sophisticated manner in which flats are now mass-produced and marketed may be found in any number of adverts of the Greek mass media. In the following example, "kataskeves.net" (constructions.net) is the domain name chosen by the company "Daktylidis Property Development", which also publicises a full-page advert in several of the nation's popular magazines. [See Image 3.14] In this advertisement, the illustration reveals a virtual model of a large-scale building that is comprised of various individual flats. To be sure, well before any of these properties actually become constructed, the use of digital imaging technologies help smooth the way for the prearranged sales of as many units as possible, while similar in manner to a classified ad, the text of each advert functions to promote the company's latest project:

"KOLONOS

Near the Archaeological Site of Plato's Academy.
Flats from 48m² to 82m², 1st, 2nd, 5th, 6th and 7th floors,
finest quality construction."¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁸ My translation from the original text in Greek.

In an overcrowded city such as Athens, at the moment that residential buildings grow in scale they require the destruction of old properties and the appropriation of multiple lots of land. In response to how this recent type of mass-produced architecture is becoming dominant in increasingly more parts of the Athenian landscape, the large-scale residential block provides the setting for the following two photographs: *"Metal Cabinets For Your Balconies"*, *Tavros*, and *Supermarket, Keratsini*, both of which have consumer society and the quality of modern urban life as an underlying theme. [See Images 3.15 - 3.16] Using wry humour, the title *"Metal Cabinets For Your Balconies"* actually refers to the signboards of a small local furniture craftsman that is depicted in the centre of the image, at the moment that a mass of new residential architecture towers overhead. Highlighted in the sunlight, the balconies that appear plentiful on the new buildings in connection with the formal title of the image and the overabundance of signage covering the workshop all add up to suggest, on the one hand, that business is good for the local cabinet-maker. Yet on the other, the shabby and dilapidated appearance of the property comes into conflict with the faceless institutional-like architecture of the recent development in the surrounding area, generating uncertainty about its future. Moreover, on the street in the foreground of the photograph, the viewer is faced with a completely different space that seems detached from the previous scene. There are billboards

and motorists, including the toil of an immigrant who is washing a windshield. These figures are all impervious to the broader landscape in which they find themselves. Incidents of everyday street-life are taking place and they are simply shown to occur.

In a similar vein to the previous photograph, the image *Supermarket, Keratsini* depicts various figures who are engaged with commonplace tasks yet are oblivious to the broader landscape that has determined the unremarkable way of life in which they find themselves. On the right, an enormous block of uninviting flats bears a large signage of a reputable property developer, at the moment that the national flag of Greece waves boldly from the roof of a major supermarket chain. In the landscape beyond, a busy street leading to the Acropolis recedes into the distance as far as the eye can see. The image is captured from the upper floor of a car park, where the actions of anonymous figures have the uncanny look of being suspended in time. They are performing identical tasks. They shop for groceries in masses and reside in uniform houses. They conduct homogeneous lives. They lead the conventional lifestyle of a 21st century modern urban life.

Conclusion

All throughout the previous chapter, I have been examining how development has made an impact on the Athenian landscape. Up until the early 20th century, the city was comprised of modest neoclassical style houses, gardens and plenty of open space. Today it is congested and overwhelming, sprawling in all directions with menacing residential architecture which give rise to a different way of life. My general concern for urban space, namely, the lack of open space in Athens has led me to visually explore the implications of its urban transformation as a subject, and to investigate the conflict between heritage and modernity over time. The work of Atget and Benjamin in Paris illustrate how as a consequence of 20th century capitalism and the drive for economic growth, landscapes were destroyed for the construction of new environments, disrupting historical continuity and hence our connection to the past. Tradition was continuously compromised to make way for the new.

Atget pursued subjects that were in the process of disappearing, working prolifically to document the old city rather than the modern one. Producing intimate topographical views with mechanical precision and documentary accuracy, what is fascinating about Atget's images is how unwittingly they show that the physical forms of the city derive from the social culture of the city's inhabitants. For the modern viewer, it is to be expected that his photographs invite historical reflection, since today, much of what he photographed has largely disappeared. Atget's work is enduring for several reasons. With his camera he demonstrates in the most direct manner, not only how urban heritage and popular culture were inextricable for the

inhabitants of Paris, but also, how much of what was established by previous generations was inevitably subject to destruction, and thus historical; encouraging new photographers to engage with the urban setting as a subject and to document their own histories.

Similar to the modernisation of the French capital and the gradual destruction of Old Paris, my research illustrates an equally dramatic transformation of Athens and its environs over the past two centuries. All throughout the 19th century, Athens comprised a remarkable attempt to build a new metropolis from scratch. For the Greek capital, which was considered a truly modern city in respect to its innovations in architecture and urban planning, it becomes clear how the urban heritage of Athens that was providing people with a sense of history was affected by the rise and fall of the classically inspired city. More specifically, in the intervening century since the initial reconstruction of the Greek capital, the Neoclassical aesthetic that was implemented in the architecture of Athens would evolve to produce countless hand crafted vernacular buildings, signifying a cultural tie that bound the city to its past. When the idea of the classically inspired city was abandoned, and its architectural diversity systematically destroyed to make way for new and increasingly larger residential buildings, Athens was destined to lose its original character irrevocably. Due to the consequences of an expanding urban centre, all throughout the 20th century and particularly after WWII, the historic city was lost to a profusion of unrelated modern architecture, roadways and automobiles, thus becoming fragmented in both scale and spirit. Because local culture and social interaction evolve directly from the built construction in which one lives, for the Athenians, just as for the Parisians before them, civic life became radically transformed. Perhaps it is not surprising how both capitals have generated a wealth of narratives, criticism, as well as similar nostalgic sentiment about the “Old city”, as a place that was lost with the passing of time.

While my imaging of Athens derives much inspiration from Atget to engage in its urban history and to document the quotidian details of Athenian life, the Greek capital bears little physical resemblance to Paris itself. Historically, the traditional working-class neighbourhoods in the oldest parts of Athens may likewise have been poor, but they never reached the state of decay. And today, the Athenian landscape does not exhibit any mammoth sized residential buildings like the one pictured in Gursky's *Paris, Montparnasse*. Nor can one find masses of prefabricated government housing blocks, which appear throughout entire districts of the more industrialised European capitals, like London. But rather, on account of unrestrained building practices together with state negligence and the interests of private enterprise, the basin of the Athenian landscape was allowed to fill up with concrete. Capitalism has altered the physiognomy of the city precisely by stripping the landscape both of nature as well as its surrounding countryside, which continues to this day. This particular aspect of the Greek capital, which the aerial views in my photographs attempt to address, is only the first of several harsh realities facing its inhabitants in the present.

My objectives to critically examine the landscape of Athens in the 21st century and to photograph the social and economic situation of our time can be measured against Gursky's images of global capitalism. Gursky illustrates how market forces have determined the manner in which urban landscapes are constructed as well as function all over the world. The landscapes that he photographs have the appearance of being placeless, ahistorical, and interchangeable. As Benjamin has previously criticised about his own era, this is what generally happens when things become commercialised; subsequently, all objects will appear to be the same.

In my own work, the depiction of Athenian architecture is selective. I purposely photograph buildings that are expressive of particular industries, such as those specialising in property development or the industry of tourism. It is landscapes like these that effectively reveal, how such a city with a history

as Athens, today could be caught in a struggle to preserve its identity and to maintain the connections with its past. Subjects like these visually demonstrate how capitalism in the Athenian landscape actually functions. For example, now more than ever scenic views are calculated, putting a premium on urban space. Moreover, it is common for old vernacular homes to be appropriated for the construction of more apartment blocks, ensuring in this way, the maximum financial gain. To be sure, developers and architects who are in the business of designing residential architecture have already determined the manner in which the Athenian is bound to live. As far as the eye can see, the cramped, mass produced living quarters that they have helped proliferate increasingly pose a disquieting juxtaposition with the city's ancient monuments. Antiquities become overshadowed, lost, and some are concealed from view altogether. Everyday in Athens, all throughout its residential neighbourhoods and the surrounding tourist areas of the Acropolis, Athenians are being reminded of how the vernacular architecture of their classical city becomes destroyed on the one hand, and how its history is being commodified on the other. It appears that the prevailing loss of cultural heritage that is now evident in the Athenian landscape derives, foremost, from the pursuit of money, which characterises the social and economic conditions of our time.

Plates



1. *Roman Ruins, Monastiraki, 2006.*



2. *The Acropolis Museum, 2006.*



3. *Em. Benaki Street, Athens, 2005.*



4. *Aigaleo Ring Road, 2006.*



5. *Refugee Apartment Blocks, Alexandras Avenue, 2005.*



6. *Stadium of Panathinaikos FC, 2006.*



7. *Supermarket, Keratsini, 2007.*



8. Bravo Coffee, Kifissos, 2009.



9. *Sepolia II, 2009.*



11. *Makeshift Bus Terminal, Omonia, 2006.*



12. *"Metal Cabinets For Your Balconies", Tavros, 2005.*



13. *Georgian Immigrants, Keratsini, 2006.*



14. *Sepolia I, 2005.*



10. *Tavros I, 2005.*



15. *Tavros II, 2005.*



16. *School, Selepitsari Park, Keratsini, 2009.*



17. *The Themistoclean Wall, Pireas, 2005.*



18. *Eleftherios Venizelos, Pireaus, 2009.*



19. *National Bank of Greece, Kotzia Square, 2005.*

Appendix

I. Technical Considerations and Artistic Concerns

My work has been produced using equipment and materials in the 5x4 inch format together with the use of negative film. The size of the film is 25 times larger than the smaller conventional 135 (24mm x 36mm) format, allowing the recording of an amazing amount of detail. Ultimately my preference for working with the large format is associated with the way the observer is made to see. This cannot be illustrated without first considering the subject of technique, where one can speak about the resulting clarity that is generally associated with the large format "aesthetic". It is worth noting how the qualities of this aesthetic impose specific ways the viewer is made to see, an aspect which became increasingly important as both my research and my photographic work progressed.

The major advantages of working in the large format can be summarized by the following: image control and size. The first is associated with the amount of control the photographer is granted during the making of each image. Because a large format technical camera requires that all adjustments be made manually, making pictures in this manner leads to a critical understanding of the relationship between the actual photographic process and the way an image will look. For example, perspective control and the distribution of sharpness are both critical matters that must be considered diligently and laboriously adjusted by hand each time the camera is set up. The shooting of a single scene may sometimes take hours to complete. The photographer is not only consumed with matters relating to "montage"; that is,

he or she is not simply left with the consideration of what to leave in or outside of the frame, but also with how the actual appearance of those elements are recorded by the camera. A photograph can be produced to display a maximum depth of field, which results in a sharp focus from edge to edge. With the right adjustments, the verticals of a building may be rendered perpendicular and erect. Thus, not only is the process of making photographs in this tradition a slow, demanding, and a meditative one, but also, there a particular visual aesthetic that arises which is directly associated with how the picture is made.

In relation to size, the large format records such an abundance of sharpness and detail, which later this enables the resulting photograph to function like a magical optical device, similar to a magnifying glass or a telescope. The large format produces an unprecedented, highly intimate view of the world. More often than not, various details that escape the photographer during the making of the photograph reveal themselves unexpectedly in the print. All the mundane artifacts of a scene become emphasized and often monumentalized. Moreover, a 5x4 inch negative can yield a very large photograph with minimal image degradation, providing a unique viewing experience for the viewer. A large photographic print has the potential to reveal multiple compelling views within a single frame, especially when it is observed segmented and from a close range, infusing a landscape photograph in this way with numerous and varied layers of meaning. As the potential to describe increases, so does the photograph's complexity and its function to invite scrutiny. As a result, both to take photographs in the large format as well as to view them, triggers a rigorous response that is associated with the act of seeing. We are often challenged by how we are able to see or how we are allowed or obliged to see. The photographic process functions as an exercise, or meditations on sight.

Everything that I have outlined above is generally characteristic of most large format work. It is for reasons of precision, clarity and detail that this traditional

photographic process continues to be the preferred mode of working for most professional architectural and topographical work. However in the case of noncommercial or creative [artistic] work, to take photographs using a large format camera produces images that are implicit, austere and objective in appearance, as well as clinical and scientific in manner. It is precisely this sort of rhetoric that I wanted this body of work to achieve.

To make landscape photographs in a congested city such as Athens has not been without its unique challenges. Most of the photographs have as their underlying subject, space itself: space in relation to architecture and its surrounding area, the way that urban space has been laid out, and a heterogeneity of spaces within a specific scene. Therefore, a broad, unobstructed and elevated perspective has been preferred over the pedestrian view to effectively capture wide vistas. Practically speaking, for many scenes this meant finding a unique solution to the fundamental problem of achieving height, which was exercised in each case, by taking the best advantage of hills, rooftops and bridges wherever possible. I was not always successful. It was quite often that the idea to photograph a specific landscape became abandoned: attributed to the failure of acquiring access to a certain perspective that was to yield the most favorable view. Less frequently, circumstances would arise where a scene was simply not "photogenic"; appearing to be more striking to the eye than with a camera, and could not be photographed.

Systematically I would investigate the city and its neighborhoods with the immediacy of a motorbike together with the use of a compact digital camera. Whenever I came upon a potential subject, I would stop to take preliminary test shots from various angles using a handheld digital camera with a wide angle lens. Notation was made about the nature of the subject, its probable access, and the direction of light. The digital images of each test site were then classified and stored away for later assessment. These methodical investigations enabled me to evaluate whether a scene was ultimately worthy

of being re-photographed in the 5x4 format. All of the negatives that were eventually produced with the technical camera were scanned, digitally enhanced with minimal image processing techniques such as basic colour and density correction, and then printed on 30x40 cm paper as test prints for later assessment. By the end of my research, the total photographs taken with the large format comprised a little less than one hundred in number. After careful editing, the final images were narrowed down to nineteen, and finally printed at a professional colour lab in the form of Lambda prints. According to the nature of the subject, two different sizes were applied to the final printing of the images: 120 x 94 cm, and 60 x 50 cm.

How does one choose which subjects eventually become re-photographed in the 5x4 format? Furthermore, what criteria was used to edit the sites that were collected over time? As my research developed, I found myself looking more systematically to find meaningful landscapes, that is to say, ones that might be used to communicate something broader about the society that inhabits it. As my reading of theoretical subjects intensified, and my exposure to various contemporary photographic work of urban landscapes increased, the subjects that were discovered during my visual explorations through the city became less general and increasingly more explicit. Although I was working intuitively, I became particularly interested in documenting monuments, dwellings, and recreational spaces, together with the broader space that was constructed around them. They became recurring subjects, typologies or motifs. They were places that were repeatedly sought after for their appearance, along with the way they functioned as evidence that could be gathered to speak of the realities of the city. As the accumulation of these test sites increased, the landscapes that were selected to be re-photographed in the large format are those that were considered to draw together the strongest references to both the city's present state and its history, that is, aspects that could formulate a dialogue between the modern world and the evidence of the city's past.

Throughout my practical work, I found that concealed behind the appearance of even the most seemingly detached and objective views, lay the rigorous manual labour of the photographic process together with the acumen of a highly skilled montage. Documenting the city of Athens was in fact, nothing less than an intricate method of editing with the camera. Photographing became a process of selecting and linking various elements which could allow a comparison of contrasting ideas to emerge: 'traditional' as opposed to 'contemporary', or simply, 'old' versus 'new'. Including more explicit ideas such as the 'urban confronting the rural', or the 'local in contrast to the global'. For example, at one particular site, the appearance of a rocky hilltop that was covered with a web of wire mesh was included in the foreground of a photograph intentionally. The construction functioned to protect a school together with the manicured parklands below from the danger of avalanches, signaling in this way, what may be broadly viewed as a distinct act of 'taming' nature. In another example, the framing of a public display of signs at the headquarters of a local coffee company were meant to signify to the observant viewer, that ultimately a take over by a well known multinational corporation has taken place. Once the framing of a photograph becomes a product of selection, the various elements in a scene are then allowed not only to stand out and speak for themselves, but also to function as clues for the observer that can reveal broader social and historical truths about the city and its places. Moreover, my commentary in Chapter 3 "Modern Athens" focused on the significance of specific photographs, which through careful framing and the skill of montage, composed views that led to various criticism about the landscape, such as the disappearance of vernacular architecture or the management and fate of antiquities. All of these photographs function to formulate visual evidence of the cultural and economic workings of landscapes, and are intended to be a form of social commentary on the politics which have produced them.

II. Looking Further

It is imperative that I refer to the important work of several contemporary photographers who approach the urban landscape with a critical eye. In addition to Andreas Gursky, the photographers that I have been meaningful to the production of my work are Gabriele Basilico from Italy, the Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky and the British photographer John Davies. Although the work they each produce is very different in terms of style, mood or spirit, all three make use of the large format to create sharp, seemingly objective, yet highly intimate views of landscapes which are rooted in the harsh realities of the "here and now", and not the timeless. They take advantage of the power of the documentary style to look critically at subjects such as, the role of architecture, the social significance of landscapes, both urban and rural, and most importantly, they work internationally to make photographs about the modern world: industry, commerce, urban renewal, etc., which seem to transcend the places in which they were made. In other words, each of their work functions to establish evidence of the realities that characterize the epoch in which we live.

Working exclusively in black and white, the photographer Gabriele Basilico (b. 1944) looks at modern developments and the impact of commercial buildings in his native city Milan, as well as in various other cities across Europe. Throughout much of Italy, the time of postwar reconstruction signaled many of the same destructive practices that can be found in Athens. Rapid and unrestrained development, lack of planning and the cementing of open space have transformed the Italian metropolis into a bewildering and chaotic environment. Trained as an architect, Basilico understands the problems of the city irrespective of its specific geographical location. Whether he is taking photographs in Italy, France, Germany, or elsewhere, he prefers to concentrate not on the self-celebrating forms of architecture, but on urban space as a whole. Basilico places modest and famous buildings on the same level, while time and time again, he allows enough surrounding space in his

photographs to disrupt the idealistic view that often prevails in commercial work in order to establish a dialogue between architecture and the environment.

In the mid 1980s, Basilico participated in the D.A.T.A.R. photographic project, a government funded scheme that aimed to document the natural and built environment of France following the initiative of the French authorities. Since then, he has been invited to take part in similar projects in several European countries such as Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, Portugal, Holland and Austria. In 1991 he travelled to the Middle East with a group of international photographers to work on a project dedicated to the city of Beirut, which had been devastated by war. In 2000 Basilico began his research on the metropolitan area of Berlin. In the same year, a retrospective of his work was shown at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam along with his latest book *Cityscapes*, which presented a selection of his work from 1984 to 1999.

In his series *Berlin*, which is published as a book with the same title by Thames & Hudson, Basilico approaches the city from the perspective of a stranger. A photograph such as *Anhalter Bahnhof (Station), 2001* captures a city that is desperately struggling to come to terms with its own history. [See Image 4.1] On the other hand, the elevated viewpoint of a construction site in the photograph titled *Potsdamer*

Platz, 2001 speaks of a city which is constantly striving to renew itself. [See Image 4.2] Basilico's photographs function as precise visual records of a landscape that is continuously changing. Tentative to the evolution of cities, he looks at the urban space throughout Europe as one infinite whole, where for the observer of his work, every metropolis together with its districts, commercial buildings and monuments may be seen as interchangeable subjects that are intended for comparison.

Edward Burtynsky (b. 1955) is a Canadian photographer who is interested in landscapes, particularly in how technology and industrial production affect the natural environment. Burtynsky's first major retrospective work, *Manufactured Landscapes* is the culmination of twenty-five years of research, which explores a variety of subject matter that is divided into series. *Railcuts, Mines and Tailings, Quarries, Oil Fields and Refineries, Shipbreaking*, as well as *Urban Mines*, which is a motif exploring the rubbish sites within the industry of mass recycling, have all been photographed in different cities throughout the world. Burtynsky researches his subjects well in advance and travels beyond North America and the western world to photograph in places such as India and Bangladesh. Despite the fact that many of the landscapes he photographs are alarming, that is, they are condensed with unsightly evidence of waste and abuse, not all of Burtynsky's images are in keeping with the straightforward documentary character, often due to their arresting beauty. Visually his photographs may be permeated with subtle lighting or bold saturated colours, and many seem to be highly abstract. Yet always they are given candid titles, each comprising information about the nature of the industry, followed by the geographical location of the place that has been photographed. For the viewer, the sublime qualities in Burtynsky's landscapes in conjunction with the neutrality of the titles function to provoke environmental awareness and social concern. We are prompted to see the ways in which our increasing dependency on natural resources, together with the broader ramifications of consumer culture in our modern world have been the cause of destruction on a global scale.

In 2005 Burtynsky published a major work on China, a project which enabled him to continue his exploration of motifs that were already established in the series *Manufactured Landscapes*. Mines of steel and coal, shipyards and recycling are some of the subjects that were pursued. However the work in China also enabled him to explore certain themes that are exemplary of worldwide technological innovation, such as the construction of the Three Gorges Dam; a colossal project of unprecedented scale, including a new series dedicated to the subject of urban planning.

Urban Renewal, the last section in Burtynsky's book about China explores the scale and character of megacities. Photographed in Hong Kong, *Urban Renewal #6, 2004* is an image depicting an open square which lies amongst mammoth sized apartment blocks. [See Image 4.3] The human figures appear dwarfed by the height of the surrounding buildings, while the character of the properties themselves appear faceless, confining, unvarying, and presumably different from the traditional Chinese architecture that existed before their construction. Andreas Gursky's photograph, *Hong Kong Island, 2004* exhibits a similar view. [See Image 4.3] The observer is faced with an impenetrable mass of colossal skyscrapers, which is typical of the kind of architecture that is overtaking Chinese cities at an

alarming pace. The model of the “Chinese City” refers to the idea of “a city of volumes built in a short space of time in which the traditional sedimentation of previous centuries does not exist.”¹⁹⁹ Moreover, *Urban Renewal #5, 2004* which depicts an elevated view of Shanghai, exhibits precisely the characteristics of such a model. [See Image 4.5] Clusters of modest structures are shown here standing amongst a sea of towering

skyscrapers that continue far into the horizon as far as the eye can see.

Having escaped redevelopment, these areas create large visible gaps that disrupt the density of the skyscrapers. Besides illustrating the overwhelming scale of an overpopulated megacity, Burtynsky’s photograph is evidence of how Shanghai is continuously rebuilding itself hundreds of meters taller over the original metropolis that must have once existed underneath it.

The British photographer John Davies (b. 1944) is also interested in urbanized landscapes, particularly those shaped by Britain’s industrialisation and de-industrialisation of the land in the communities that were once at the center of Britain’s production of steel, coal, textiles and shipping industries. His explorations of northern England and south Wales were exhibited internationally and published in 1987 under the title, *A Green & Pleasant Land*: a broad volume of work that refers to the imaging of Britain’s most managed, economic landscapes. Thereafter, commissioned work on landscape and urbanization was produced in numerous countries throughout

¹⁹⁹ See telephone conversation between Hans Ulrich, Stefano Boeri and Gabriele Basilico in: Gabriele Basilico, *Berlin*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), p. 11.

Europe, such as France, Spain, Italy, Holland, Belgium, Portugal, Germany, Austria and Switzerland, compiling the volume *Cross Currents* in 1992. In 2006, a retrospective of his British work from 1979 to 2006 was published in the book *The British Landscape*.

Davies's photographs comprise wide, elevated vistas with all around sharpness. They reveal equally with a clinical vision, the smallest details of the natural landscape together with the material artifacts of culture. For example, *Agecroft Power Station, Salford, 1983* was photographed in a site surrounded by coal mining waste. It depicts a power station that overlooks a field where minuscule figures are engaged in a match of football. [See Image 4.6] The eye of the viewer is disrupted by the foreground on the left, where amongst the appearance of a few parked vehicles, the site of debris together with a white horse are enclosed behind a fence. The sweeping pastoral view of Davies's image clashes with the bleak appearance of the power station. Meanwhile, the short text accompanying the photograph reads as a sobering, matter of fact summary of the history of place:

"Agecroft coal-fired power station was built in 1926 on the site of Agecroft Hall. ...The power station was closed in 1993 and later demolished. Today the site is occupied by HM Prison Forest Bank, for the detention of 18 to 20-year-old men."²⁰⁰

²⁰⁰ John Davies, *The British Landscape*, (London: Chris Boot Ltd.), 2006, p. 34.

Similar to Burtynsky's work, the sublime qualities in Davies's photographs in conjunction with the text function to provoke environmental awareness and broader social concern. Once at the centre of industrious and economic activity, at the moment that the industrial infrastructure of these communities became obsolete, many suffered a loss of population and economic decline. By the end of the 21st century, all of the postindustrial landscapes in Davies's photographs had been subjected both to radical social and historical change, and one of the tasks Davies sets out for himself is to provide evidence of their development, advancement, progress or decline.

Bowling Greens, Stockport, 1988 is another example of urban transformation. In this elevated view, Davies has concentrated on the subject of a public park and the British sport of bowling, where once again, the appearance of minuscule figures are shown engaged in athletic activity. [See Image 4.7]

The accompanying text reads:

... As with many other public parks established in Victorian Britain, its creation was a response to the poor living conditions of industrial workers. Bowling became a popular sport in England in the late 19th century, and the park's Crown Bowling Green continues to host regular bowling competitions today.²⁰¹

As with the majority of Davies's work, the photograph makes reference not only to the history of place, but also to the privatization of land and the historic layering of landscapes. By looking at civic centres and the design of space, for example places of recreation which are designed to attract people, Davies documents the different

²⁰¹ Ibid., p. 72.

ways in which cities strive to reinvent themselves in order to attract economic investment, commerce and culture.

In 2001 Davies made photographs in the city of Newcastle that focused on building development and the historic layering of architecture. *Westgate, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 2001* is a photograph that is taken on Westgate Road, which is symbolic of the wall that was built by the Roman Emperor Hadrian and the wall's western gate that led into the city. [See Image 4.8] In light of these historical facts, Davies concentrates on Westgate Hall, a concrete office building that is typical of British architecture in the 1960s. The menacing manner in which the building is shown in juxtaposition to the neighboring modest structures creates a critical image of the ways modern architecture can disrupt the harmonious rhythms of a city. In relation to urban redevelopment, it is a subject that is encountered all too often and can be found in cities all around the world, including Athens.

III. Audiences: Reception and Impact

For the viewer of contemporary, large format work that documents the urban landscape, such photographs function to help make sense of urban development and the radically changing environments that in which we all live. For the first time in history, the majority of the world's population is now living in cities, while the cities of the world are continuously under the

pressure to cope with the ramifications of overpopulation, pollution, and the imperative to regenerate. Photographers like Basilico, Burtynski, Davies or Gursky who travel systematically in order to make images about urban landscapes, do so because they have found crucial matters to say about them. Through their work, they lay bare the hard facts about our modern global society by methodically exploring the ramifications of industry and commerce, consumption, the privatization of land, or the destruction of nature. Similar to an investigator or a scientist, they often adopt the analytic eye of a sociologist, an urban historian, an architect or activist to reveal and to question things about the landscape with their photographs as they see fit, which would not otherwise be seen. Frequently, the images are layered and multifaceted; merging evidence of more marginal themes such as national identity, historic memory or civic pride. Other times, they question our collective responsibility and provoke a broader social concern about the places they are exploring. Whatever the approach, in the setting of a gallery or museum, the observing audience of such works usually walks away from them having learned or experienced something new about the world. The objective for my own work is to function in a similar manner.

For viewers who are familiar with the city of Athens, the photographs may function to reaffirm their views about the chaotic environment in which they are obliged to work and live. Alternatively, they may be prompted to experience the familiar aspects of the city in an entirely new way, that is, from the point of view of a stranger. For non Greek audiences, the Athenian landscape exhibits a character that is unique on the one hand, yet on the other, it is symbolic of a modern culture that is prevalent in today's societies all over the world. The difference between localism and the universal, as I have attempted to address in my research, and the idea of Athens in regard to faceless globalisation comprises a balance by which all of these landscapes were continuously sought out, as well as the motivational drive behind the production of each photograph.

In conclusion, I have found that the more one is exposed to this particular type of large format work, and the more one sees images of urban landscapes from different parts of the world, the material artifacts of culture that much of this work discloses functions as a potential means of indexing social relations. In the mind of the viewer, the impact of these visual records will then begin to exceed far beyond the specific subject matter of each photograph. What happens in the landscape of Athens, or what is shown happening in Newcastle, Berlin or Shanghai collectively become images of a single puzzle: an infinite urban space that becomes conjured up, both fragmented and in the raw, by the medium of photography. It is now my conviction that one of the most powerful uses of photography today is its potential to instill in the individual, a geopolitical perspective about the world.

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