

Medium retains its mystique

An unconventional history of photography—to be continued

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John Reekie's photograph A Burial Party, Cold Harbor, Virginia (1865)

In *The Miracle of Analogy: or the History of Photography, Part I*, the art historian Kaja Silverman is after photography's imagination; she wants to picture its sensibility. It is not simply "some medium that was invented by two or three men in the 1820s and 1830s, that was improved on in numerous ways over the following century". It is much more: it is "the world's primary way of revealing itself to us—of demonstrating that it exists, and that will forever exceed us".

Although her book is ostensibly about 19th-century photography (a companion volume on the 20th century is due in a couple of years), it is really a meditation on photography's essence, rich in catholic claims that outstrip any historical period. Pictures, for Silverman, are universal reminders of our limits. Even their origin is beyond our reach. "It is as impossible to know when photography began as it is to know when our first ancestors opened their eyes," she writes. Photography is primarily a matter of the imagination, not of technology.

This imagination, however, is unstable and constantly on the move. In 1826, it took the French photographer Nicéphore Niépce eight hours of exposure to capture *View from the Window at Le Gras*. The vicissitudes of the day, shadows and sunshine, are

everywhere present in the picture. "My sole object is to copy nature with the greatest fidelity, and it is that to which I attach myself exclusively," Niépce wrote. But what is fidelity in a world of permanent flux? Silverman quotes the French philosopher Henri Bergson: "Everything changes at every moment. It does so without ceasing. There is, consequently, no such thing as form; there is only formation."

Amid this instability, Silverman sees photography as something that holds us together. It acts as "a kind of republic" that "links us to one another [in] a particularly binding and democratising" way. But the only true democracy is the democracy of death. Silverman turns to John Reekie's 1865 photograph of African-American soldiers at work at an American Civil War burial ground. "They all look down at the ground, from which they came, and to which they will one day return."

Here, as at many points, Silverman's words are hollow. Photography does have a special monopoly on mortality (it is always about absence), but Silverman does not excite our aesthetic anxiety; her writing is not precise enough. The professor of contemporary art at the University of Pennsylvania has written a smart, poetic book, but its poetry has to be cut from a forest of stilted academic prose. The style of the academy is present throughout, but nowhere more so than in the section on the German writer Walter Benjamin. Benjamin, in Silverman's words, sees "ontological as well as pictorial" possibilities in photography, ones that have "profound social consequences". This is why, for him, photography can be put to explicit political use. "Benjamin's relationship to photography is unquestionably instrumental," she writes.

Yet Benjamin, despite his Marxism, is poorly understood in these terms. Like so many other great writers who have focused on photography (Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes), Benjamin is a mystic; he is at his best when he is abstruse and compacted. And although Silverman knows that Benjamin's beauty is in his inscrutability (his writing is "dynamic and unmasterable," she writes), she cannot resist the academic call of interpretation. Benjamin is thus put at the service of a narrative he cannot support.

Silverman approvingly cites a remark he made about an 1887 photograph of a four-year-old Franz Kafka: "He would surely be lost... were it not for his immeasurably sad eyes, which dominate the landscape predestined for them." Both Benjamin and Silverman dig too deep. Was Kafka truly sad that day? Does he really dominate the landscape? Only with hindsight and knowledge of Kafka's difficult life can we look back on the child and impose such an interpretation. But art does not benefit from this. Silverman is better in those few moments when she follows the advice of the blind photographer John Dugdale, who once wrote: "The quietude people respond to in my pictures is, in part, because of the way they are made: no flash; no harsh electric light; not even the sound of the shutter." Dugdale knows that photography, like all art, is mute. All we can do is revel in its quiet imagery.