



## Eugène Atget and the Arqueology of Seeing

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### Resumen:

Quando Eugène Atget (1857-1927) inicia seu trabalho fotográfico, a inexorabilidade da modernização de Paris era um fato consumado. Nesta apresentação, pretendo abordar o raro conjunto de imagens produzidas pelo fotógrafo no qual representa os petits métiers, pequenos ofícios em vias de desaparecimento desta “nova” Paris. Gostaria de investigar, à luz da imagística do período, as possíveis relações entre a representação dos pequenos ofícios como formas “arcaicas” ou “residuais” de trabalho e o choque com o “novo” que se instaurava no âmbito do processo de modernização do cenário urbano na Paris do final do século XIX. Algumas das questões centrais desta apresentação incluem: “Qual a identificação afetiva (Einfühlung) de Atget com a classe operária, ele próprio um petit métier?” e “Quais os procedimentos formais utilizados para revelar a verdade estrutural de seu tempo, destruir o mito da imediaticidade do presente de uma História fossilizada para, em oposição a esta, formular novos modos de conceber a História, não como de fato aconteceu ou como deveria ser lembrada, mas como foram esquecidas as ruínas, a opressão e a violência dos vencedores?”

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## Eugène Atget and the Archeology of Seeing

Eugène Atget (1857 – 1927) was born and bred under the sign of modernization in Paris, an enterprise spearheaded by Baron Haussmann as of 1853. There wouldn't be enough time here to paint such an enterprise in its truest colours. I recognise, however, the fundamental importance of taking it into account when considering our photographer's production. I will simply contend that its corresponding forms of social organization – a consequence of the recent urban and architectural modifications and the ways that money began to circulate – were not sheer cultural or ideological redecoration, but rather the image of a global economic change related to the very movement of Capital. The strategic development or beautifying of the city (and its outskirts, for that matter) by a “demolishing architect” was a rational method in an attempt to root out whatever desire for insurrection, and if it ever materialized, to ruthlessly put it down in the most effective fashion.

When Atget begins his photographic work the inexorability of this process was a *fait accompli*. Being a simple man, often living from hand to mouth (he first attempted to be a comedian, soon to encounter enough frustration to make him change to painting; again, more disillusion; photography became a means of survival), Atget could not but look *haussmanization* (and its following chapters) in the eye, a process of which he was both a victim and a spokesman. His mapping of the reconstruction of Paris with the use of “lenses” that allowed to “see” the substitution of a certain form of living for another includes images made in all of its neighbourhoods, its twenty *arrondissements*, portraying the inside of bourgeois apartments, vanishing streets, alleys and squares, large boulevards, third-rate prostitutes and the *zonières*, those who, because of modernization, were sent to the limits of the town. Here I will concentrate on a small but significant (and much less known) portion of his oeuvre: *les petits métiers* or the small trades.

Between 1891 and 1901 Atget attempted to establish connections between those who work in the small trades on the brink of disappearance and the urban scene of Paris in the *fin de siècle*. Regarding the representation of labour, to Atget the city **was** the small trades, which will be photographed in public spaces such as in the series made in a small



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street market between Place Saint-Medard and Rue Mouffetard, in the fifth neighbourhood of the city. I will now describe some of these images.

One of the photographs shows the square from afar in a frontal angle and dates from 1898. In a panoramic view we see, to the right, part of the façade of a church, quite ancient compared to the other buildings. In the middle of the image, a building covered by a myriad of advertisements. Some of them read: “Au Bon Marché” and in the largest of them all “Grand bazar universel.” Below this: “Vins et dégustation”. To the left, more of the same: “Chocolat Vinay”, “Boulangerie-pâtisserie” and similar adverts. Pedestrians, street-vendors, trades-people and customers circulate everywhere. The portion of the street in the foreground and the surroundings leave no doubt about the space to be represented and investigated: the setting which still bears some resemblance to what was once Old Paris. At this point we, the spectators, still observe it from a certain distance. However, the other images that compose the set invite the viewer to approach the main subject of the photograph: the workers and their activities. The images of those depicted are quite similar to one another: in the centre the “main characters”, beside them some “stand-in actors” and in the background part of the setting, now out of focus. Here the low depth of field entails the choice of a point of view which encourages the viewer to focus on the main characters, with the camera placed at eye level helping to “install” the observer inside the scene. This is how we “get to know” a wandering peddler having a chat with some “character” in the square, a flower seller and her client or perhaps her partner. Men, women and children wear similar clothes and seem to behave in a similar fashion, involved in their daily life chores, which makes it hard for us to differentiate between “buyer” and “seller”, a “class” or “another”. Judging from their “characterization” and “acting”, their “roles” seem “interchangeable”. Emphasis does not fall on the individual. In this group of photographs, Atget typifies. Therefore, the square is depicted as the stage of urban life, where each character is represented in his most typical role, acting in scenes of social life.

At this point, I would like to concentrate on the issue of depth of field, fundamental to understand Atget’s iconographic production. At first, the photographer shows us the square and its visual ambiguities attributing sharp focus to all (or most) elements: the



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ancient – the church – and the new – the buildings in a different architectural style -, the colonization of space by the commodity, the visual chaos and the vast amount of information in the “spectacle”, which can hardly be absorbed – let alone grasped – by the eye. The scenic elements composing the image are laid bare. However, the more specific Atget gets about the representation of the worker and the labour the more out of focus is the background. In this process, which was fully mastered by the photographer, the image of the small trades is liberated from the city of Baron Haussmann, to which they no longer belong (or rather, they belonged by exclusion). Possibly one of its best examples is an image entitled “XIII – Quartier Croulebarde – un chiffonnier, le matin, avenue des Gobelins (1901)”.

The picture shows us a man – a ragpicker – pulling a cart full of sacs with high definition in the foreground. His figure is small compared to the height of the sacs attached by the use of a cord to the cart; this ensemble occupies a great deal of the picture. The lower part of his body reveals one of the legs, the right one, stepping forward in an evident movement of advancing, forming, even with a slightly bent knee, a straight line, inclined to the left in relation to the sacs piled up, creating a movement in this direction. The left leg, firmly standing back, somewhat destabilizes the oscillation previously mentioned as it helps to construct another straight line, inclined to the right, smaller in size than the first one. From these lines, a tension is born, not of equal but asymmetrical and opposing forces.

The upper part of the human figure reveals stiff arms, rigid shoulders and a fixed stare at the observer of the image (us!), contradicting what the legs suggest: in a dialectical movement, the ragpicker advances and retreats, budging forward and backward. In the background we see a rather unclear, out of focus boulevard, newish buildings, cars – the components of modern life – in what was once an area reserved to weavers (Boulevard des Gobelins is also a result of the Great Works of modernization implemented by Haussmann. The traditional factory is at number 42. The Théâtre des Gobelins at 73 was built in 1869 for the arts impresario Henri Laroche who held the control of several other show houses. Peripherally the image may also inform of the commodification of the arts in general – think of Marcel Carne’s “Les Enfants du Paradis”).



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The photograph probes into a number of relevant issues. To begin with, the urban mobility imposed to those who were part of the small trades. Those excluded from the new forms of exchange that happened in modern Paris were forced to circulate to aspire to more visibility and maximise their earnings (here any resemblance to the process of circulation of capital and commodities is not accidental). The image speaks of the growth of the city as well: “In the second half of the nineteenth century, when the daily volume of garbage grew considerably with the progress of industry and consumption, the activity of the tradesmen changed and became linked to a growing industry of refuse. The ragpicker then appeared, as part of the “lumpen proletariat” – the final fall from the scale of social class hierarchies which posed, in Walter Benjamin’s words, “the mute question as to where the limit of human misery lay”. The figure of the ragpicker quickly came to function in the social imaginary as the symbol of the entire population of small tradesmen, with their urban mobility.”<sup>2</sup>

These were the “professionals” that took the urban garbage to the outskirts of the city which, after being recycled, returned to the metropolis in the form of new commodities. As he was represented by Atget, the ragpicker is part of a sculpture, shown as an inseparable component of the rest of the ensemble, the debris, to which he, too, is attached. This thanks to the tonal value attributed to the whole bloc. So, there are no clear-cut borders between the man, the cart and the commodity: all have the same value in the scene. There is no hierarchy among the various elements that compose the image and this establishes a radically new material relation: reducing the worker (the human body engaged in labour) to a minimum common denominator of an equation conceived in terms of the modernization of Paris, conjured up on the same level of the garbage which will come back to be re-used in different (different?) ways, Atget reveals formally the contradictions between the modern and the ancient, the advance and the retreat, now sedimented in the body of the worker, thoroughly reified.

Here, the action of moving forward (advancing, modernizing), which does not take place without resistance, is a constituent part of moving backwards. In other terms: the former is an integral part of the latter and cannot but be conceived as the final result of

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. LE GALL, G. *Atget – life in Paris*. Paris: Édition Hazan, 1998, p. 17.



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this operation of social subtraction – the city decomposes, society crumbles into ruins. The unparalleled merit of the photographer was to establish formal relations between the public and the private, the inside and the outside, the past and the present (History as conceived by Benjamin), the brutal monotony (the kingdom of commodity fetishism) and the final dionysian disorder – Paris as a bourgeois ballroom, Paris as Commune, Paris as a panorama in flames. Atget aligns art and criticism (an art both dialogic and negative) to unveil ideology where it constitutes a mistake well founded on appearances. “He was the first to disinfect the stifling atmosphere generated by conventional portrait photography in the age of the decline. 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.”<sup>3</sup> Atget, in keeping with the naturalism of Zola, describes and by doing so intensifies the sign to the point of condensation in a visual demand that goes beyond narration – it passes judgement on the fact represented. Like Daumier’s “Ratapoil”, a mass of scars, active, proud and destitute, Atget lends to his ragpicker a material density, presenting him as a material thing. The energy with which Daumier represented Evil and its sequels, described in the famous verses by Baudelaire, is also present in Atget.

Therefore, the use of focus (or lack thereof) to figurate the ragpicker is far for a mere aesthetic effect. It is instead an artistic and political strategy revealing in the abstract space of modern Paris the locus of abstract space of money, now in the form of finance Capital. In tune with Baudelaire’s ragpicker, the abstractions of the financial processes are diverse but not alienated from the tragic concretion of modernity. The photographer understands the lesson given by the poet: Paris produces its *spleen* and the *spleen* produces its Paris. Their revolutionary melancholy demands that the artistic production should reflect the transitory extracting from it its eternal fraction – like evidences in a historical trial. In Benjamin’s own words: “It has justly been said that Atget photographed [the streets of Paris] like scenes of crimes. A crime scene, too, is deserted; it is photographed for the purposes of establishing evidence. With Atget, photographic records begin to be evidence in the historical trial [Prozess]. This constitutes their hidden

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. BENJAMIN, W. Little History of Photography, p. 518.



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political significance. They demand a specific kind of reception. Free-floating contemplation is no longer appropriate to them. They unsettle the viewer; he feels challenged to find a particular way to approach them [...]. The way each single image is understood seems prescribed by the sequence of all the preceding images.”<sup>4</sup>

By making use of photography, a less “artistic” form of expression, a “distant relative” of its more prestigious, wealthy (and politically eclectic) “cousin”, the official art of the July Monarchy, *le juste milieu*, he seems to speak in the same “downgraded” language of the advertising or poster design about the degradation of the social life of those who acted on the following chapters of the process of modernization initiated by Napoleon I and carried on by his nephew and assistant baron. Especially when we consider his relation with his own trade and his seclusion from the most modern photographic processes, which included special lenses, filters and correction of “imperfections” in the image (Disdéri). At the same time he gave expression to the obsolescence of his characters in a play that assigned them undesirable social roles he also brought them to the fore: “The tradesmen posing for the camera are like actors pointing themselves out on the stage of the urban theatre. In the language of the French theatre, *le pointe* was the climatic moment in the play when the actors stood forth alone in the middle of the stage to deliver his monologue facing the public. This convention had the particularity of interrupting the action unfolding on the stage, just as the tradesmen cease their activity to engage in a process of representation.”<sup>5</sup>

If the city became the great theatre of bourgeois pride, Atget contrasts the apparently simplicity of his images with the spectacular forms of modernization thus “interrupting the action” of the bourgeois drama in order to involve his spectator in a rather different type of staging, more “scientific”, “didactic”. He exposes a systemic contradiction reminding us that: 1. class struggle begins in the extraction of surplus value not in armed revolutionary confrontation and 2. that oppression is not a state or a given, but a continuous and truculent process serving the interests of Capital. In his representation there is no room for illusionism. Besides a resemblance with Zola’s naturalist project, his

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<sup>4</sup> BENJAMIN, W. The work of art in the age of its reproducibility.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. LE GALL, G. *Atget – life in Paris*. op. cit. pp. 15-17.



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direct interlocutor, similarities with the Brechtian project can be established: his photography is a synthesis of a determined reality. This, I believe, is Atget's "epic realism".