

## SEEING AND SAYING: A RESPONSE TO “INCONGRUOUS IMAGES”<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

In responding to an essay by Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer about photographs taken in the streets of Chernivitsi (Czernowitz) in the 1940s, and thus in the midst of the Holocaust, this paper seeks to link their concerns to a broader consideration of photography as a modern phenomenon. In the process, the paper provides a brief history of street photography, a genre virtually ignored in standard histories of the photographic medium. The author suggests that Hirsch and Spitzer’s paper bravely reminds us that our fascination with photographs is based not on truth, but on a combination of desire (our own desire to transcend death) and faith (in photography’s ability to deliver this end, in the face of all the evidence to the contrary). Their account of street photography in Czernowitz thereby amounts to an interpretation of photographs as dynamic modes of apprehension rather than as static objects from the past that veridically represent it. It is precisely this aspect of photographs that makes them such unusually complicated, ambiguous, and incongruous historical objects.

*Keywords:* photography, street photography, Barthes, memory, history, punctum, deconstruction

Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer’s paper aims to do what the curators at the Bukowina Jewish Museum of History and Culture in Chernivitsi apparently cannot: to reveal the complexity of “the visual and historical landscape of the Holocaust.” In the process, they also contribute to an expansion of the “visual and historical landscape” of photography as a modern phenomenon. That’s what I’d like to concentrate on in my response—in fact, on seeing these two projects as inextricably related, as I’m sure they do also.

At the heart of their paper is a genre of photography so ordinary that most histories of photography (including all the ones that I consulted) completely ignore it.<sup>2</sup> I’m talking about “street photography,” a term that has in recent years been co-opted as a kind of art category but which traditionally has been used to refer to a genre of commercial photographic practice in which people walking in a public space, usually the street, are photographed and are then offered the opportunity to buy a copy of that photograph.

1. Thanks go to Kate Bussard for her help with the preparation of this essay.

2. The standard histories of photography don’t mention street photography. Even a history supposedly dedicated to it mentions the vernacular, commercial version of the practice in a single sentence in the Introduction, and then only in order to distance itself from it. See Colin Westerbeck and Joel Meyerowitz, *Bystander: A History of Street Photography* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 34.

In the 1930s one couldn't have walked down a major street in any Western city and not be snapped by such a photographer. Even today one can experience this sort of practice, if, for example, one visits the Central Park Zoo in New York or Sugar Loaf Mountain in Rio de Janeiro, to name just two places where I have experienced it myself.

In those two cases, the subject agrees to stand still for a camera set up for that purpose. This is also what Walker Evans found in 1930 when he documented the practice of street photography. The Evans photographs, a group of six frames from a contact sheet shot in New York, show us a street photographer at work. The tripod legs of the street photographer's camera rest literally in the street, while his camera body is decorated with samples of his work. We see a dapper gentleman in a suit and white hat engaging in conversation with the more casually dressed photographer, who is accompanied at first by a young boy and then, as the shoot begins, by a small crowd of interested children. The man in the hat remains on the sidewalk, posing for his impromptu portrait, while the photographer moves his camera back further into the street to get a better shot. The relationship between subject and photographer is therefore constructed to be much like that between Evans and most of his own portrait subjects—static, sharply focused, eye-to-eye, consensual, collaborative, cooperative, and therefore, at least potentially, empathetic—“affiliative,” as Hirsch and Spitzer want to call it.



Figure 1. Vicente Revilla, *A street photographer at work near the Catedral del Cusco, Cusco, Peru, c. June 1990.*

Permission to reproduce granted by courtesy of the photographer.

One of the interesting things about this kind of photographic practice is how international it is. And how enduring. A photograph taken in about June 1990 by Vicente Revilla near the Catedral del Cusco in Peru shows another street photographer working in almost exactly the same manner as the one captured by Evans

sixty years before in New York (Figure 1). In this case the customer is a boy. He has been seated on a wooden stool with his back against the cathedral wall. A man in a skullcap is holding a small white sheet behind his upper body to ensure that the portrait will be unencumbered by extraneous background details. Perhaps this portrait was meant to function as part of an identity card? The photographer's camera rests firmly on its tripod and is again festooned with examples of his work, including a number of horizontal group portraits. Once the image has been exposed it will be developed and printed inside the camera body, which is therefore also a mini-darkroom (making it truly a camera obscura). This allows customers to take away their print right there and then. Photographers of this kind can still be found today throughout Latin America as well as in many parts of Africa. They continue a nineteenth-century photographic tradition, and with it the idea of the portrait photograph as a formal exercise in picture-making, as if the street is just an outdoor studio.



Figure 2. Unknown photographer (American?), *Woman photographed three times while walking in the street*, c. 1940s. Collection of the author

However, I've also seen many street photographs similar to the ones Hirsch and Spitzer discuss (Figure 2). The subjects in these pictures are in motion, often, but not always, aware of the photographer, even smiling for him—as one automatically does in the presence of a camera—but not fully in compliance with his wishes, not yet party to a financial transaction or even to a conversation with the photographer.<sup>3</sup> This conversation is what is about to happen in each of these photographs. The photographer, or his assistant, is about to offer these people the opportunity to purchase a copy of the exposure that has just been made. The camera they are looking at is again festooned with such photographs, acting as a convenient advertisement of its own capabilities.

3. The idea that one should smile for a camera has its own history; in other words, it is a convention. It was not considered proper to smile for the camera in the nineteenth century, and relatively slow exposure times discouraged it anyway. It was only in the early twentieth century that Kodak sought to associate snapshot photography with happiness and thus with smiling. See Nancy Martha West, *Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000).

As Hirsch and Spitzer have told us, this kind of photography is dependent on certain technological developments—in particular, rapid exposure times and direct positive paper that allows for instant development. One might think that focus would be a problem if the subject is moving, but this problem can be solved if the camera is placed at a set position and the shutter pressed just as each group of subjects reaches a particular mark on the pavement. An experienced photographer can set his or her focus for that distance and take many sharp exposures by that means, without having to constantly adjust the camera.

The Belgian contemporary artist Francis Alÿs, who has an eye for visual practices beneath the contempt of respectable art history, has gathered a collection of these kinds of street photographs that were taken in Mexico City in the 1940s.<sup>4</sup> But it's very difficult to find much information about this practice. It is a species of photography that has more or less experienced complete neglect at the hands of the medium's historians. In fact, the only relatively extensive historical account I could find about this practice was published in Australia in 1983 by a well-known local photographer named John Williams.<sup>5</sup> The essay includes a street photograph taken in Sydney of Williams with his family in 1949. He says such photographs were made in that city from about 1930 to about 1950, when these kinds of photographers were finally banned from the streets by the city council as unwanted pests. For a small amount of money, a customer got what Williams describes as "a sloppily printed and generally poorly fixed and washed print which rarely looked all that much better than the average family snap." He dates the practice from the Great Depression, suggesting that "street photographer" was not a desirable profession except in times of mass unemployment.

The implication of this last observation is that street photographers came from a different class stratification from that of their subjects, such that street photography of this period involved a working-class photographer capturing a candid image of middle-class subjects (an exact reversal of the situation for, say, Evans and most of his sitters). Buying a street photograph therefore involved a particular kind of transaction between members of one class and members of another. As with so many other acts of consumption, one of the things customers get for their money is an affirmation of their class status, via a confirmation of class difference. In Sydney these street photographers were usually hired by established studios that would rent the photographers a camera and give them a day's supply of film and then set them loose in the street. Photographers would stake out a territory and basically photograph everyone who walked by. After each shot, a potential customer would be handed a business card on which was marked the number of the film, the place where the contact prints from the film might be viewed (usually a booth in a city arcade), and the time when such contacts might be viewed. Prints

4. See Francis Alÿs, *Instantáneas*, 1994–2006, comprising a group of 140 photographs, in various formats and sizes, taken by street photographers in Mexico City from the 1940s to the 1960s and found by Alÿs in Mexico City flea-markets, as reproduced in Katherine Bussard, Frazer Ward, and Lydia Yee, *Street Art, Street Life: From the 1950s to Now* (New York: Bronx Museum and Aperture, 2009), 70-71.

5. John Williams, "Double-take on Street Photography," *Photofile* (Sydney, Winter 1983), 1, 5-6.

cost roughly the same as a glass of beer (a very Australian way of measuring value). Street photographers worked on commission, and so were entirely dependent on making a sale for their income. It was, in other words, a tough business to be in and hard to make a living from.

Williams estimates that photographers of this sort might have taken about 14,500 snapshots of passers-by per day, resulting in about 4.5 million portraits a year in Sydney alone, a city of about one million inhabitants at that time. He guesses that perhaps only about five percent of these photographs were ever actually bought. What's interesting, of course, is that people did actually stop and buy them, despite their relatively poor aesthetic values. All the ones I have seen suggest they all adhered to some remarkably consistent pictorial principles. They are almost invariably in a vertical format, showing people relatively well dressed and prosperous looking (there would be no point in photographing someone who obviously could not afford to buy a print; in any case, in those days, people got dressed up to go into the city), usually shot from slightly below but without spatial distortions (which again might preclude a sale), with the subjects more or less centered in the picture plane and looking either ahead or in the direction of the camera, surrounded by a partial view of the street and its architecture.

The repetitious nature of these pictorial values and the banality of the images themselves make them typical of the vast majority of vernacular photographs. It also explains why they have remained invisible to the history of photography, why they have hitherto defied historical interpretation *as photographs*. For these kinds of photograph—authorless, commercial, uncreative, cheap, available everywhere from Czernowitz to New York to Mexico City to Sydney—refuse to make themselves available to three of the central organizing principles of photographic history as an official discourse: innovation, biography, and nationalism. They refuse, in other words, to adhere to the demands of an art history of photography, the mode of historical evaluation that continues to dominate accounts of the medium.<sup>6</sup>

What's striking about Hirsch and Spitzer's paper is their effort to look beyond art history and to find another means of historical interpretation for these kinds of pictures. This effort is signaled in part by the shifts in delivery they adopt throughout their paper, at one point sounding academic and sure of themselves (signified by the certainties of a map) and at another intensely personal and very unsure indeed (embodied in image form by a photographic detail blurred beyond recognition). The story they tell about street photographs taken in Czernowitz in the late 1930s and early 1940s therefore comes to us in suspension, caught in a movement of rhetorical hesitation between history and memory, evidence and speculation, the private and the public, desire and loss, the first person and the third. The photographs they describe are unashamedly ordinary, but they bring them to life by placing them in the hands of their owners. Touch, voice, sentiment, emotion, reminiscence: these are the sensations such photographs induce in those depicted in them.

6. See Geoffrey Batchen, "Vernacular Photographies," in *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 56-80, 199-204.

But what of our interlocutors, two scholars confined to the second-degree experience of what Hirsch has called "postmemory"?<sup>7</sup> They speak of the "oscillating look" these photographs elicit in them, and they seek to replicate that oscillation in their own mode of interpretation. They point to the contradictions embodied in the images they are examining, and to some extent they reproduce those contradictions in their own account of them. I suggest that these oscillations and contradictions tell us a lot about the complexity of photography as a vehicle for historical interpretation, and even of its resistance to such interpretation.

The first thing Hirsch and Spitzer do is place what I've been describing as a generic, international practice in a specific historical context—the advent of the Holocaust in the town of Czernowitz. What strikes them as incongruous is the continuity of the practice of street photography in this town before and after 1941, the date when two-thirds of the Jewish population was deported and the remainder was forced to wear yellow stars and adhere to curfews. Why, they ask, "could their [Jewish] subjects walk down the street during this terrible time with such apparent ease and freedom"? And why would those same subjects stop to buy a photo that recorded them in the midst of such a humiliation?

Our scholars warn themselves to beware of "backshadowing," of looking back with too much knowledge of what is to come. But how could they not? As descendants of these same Jews, they search these photographs for signs of the devastation of the Holocaust and are disturbed to find something else. Actually, they're disturbed to find nothing—nothing untoward, that is. These images of Jews walking confidently in the streets after 1941 support Lotte Hirsch's surprising contention that "it was actually not an unhappy time for her," in spite of everything that we know now. Life went on, these photographs contend: people kept walking and talking, unexceptional photographs kept getting made and kept getting bought.

Finding no obvious signs of the Holocaust in the attitudes of the walkers or in the pictorial decisions made by the photographers, our speakers channel their terrible retrospective knowledge onto the presence of an actual sign, the yellow star that Jews were forced to wear on their lapels. When seen in an otherwise ordinary street photograph, this sign, they tell us, "arrests and confounds our look." It's a detail, they say, that "once perceived, annihilates the rest of the image."

Hirsch and Spitzer have already identified the contextual information to be derived from such photographs—what middle-class urban dwellers in Czernowitz wore in the 1930s and '40s, how they walked, the decorum of touches between members of a couple, what a typical sidewalk and façade looked like, and so on—with Roland Barthes's notorious term "*studium*."<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, they now contrast the historical tedium of this *studium* with the sublime "hypervisible" memorial shock value of the yellow star: "the star," they contend, "is Barthes's *punctum* as detail."

This division of *studium* from *punctum*, although convenient as a conceptual tool to describe their own act of looking at these images, nevertheless obscures

7. See Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

8. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, transl. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

the complexity of Barthes's account of photography. For what has most shocked Hirsch and Spitzer is in fact not the entirely expected appearance of yellow stars on the lapels of the Jewish inhabitants of Czernowitz in 1941; it is the entirely unexpected normalcy of everything else. It is the obstinate banality of these images that shocks the contemporary observer, not the baleful appearance of a sign of the Holocaust. More precisely, it is the oscillation between banality and something else (between the banality of vernacular photography and the banality of evil) that lacerates the eye, just as it is the dynamic, inseparable interrelation of *studium* and *punctum*, the deconstructive interdependence of One and its Other, that so animates and complicates any easy understanding of Barthes's version of the photographic experience.<sup>9</sup> Allow me to expand on this point a little.

Barthes describes photography's impossible character, partaking equally of life and death and refusing to rest with either, as producing in him a "distortion between certainty and oblivion." This gives him, he says, a kind of "vertigo": "something of a 'detective' anguish" follows.<sup>10</sup> The reference he gives is to Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 film *Blow-Up*, in which a skeptical young photographer named Thomas seeks to prove to himself that he has inadvertently captured a murder in one of his pictures. Hirsch and Spitzer soon find themselves replicating that detective anguish in their own obsessive investigation of the street photograph of Carl and Lotte Hirsch walking along the street in 1942. No star is visible, they tell us, until, that is, they scan and enlarge the image, "blowing it up several times" and searching for "what might not be visible to the naked eye."

In Antonioni's film, Thomas searches for the photographic trace left by a dead body, seeking evidence of a murder he suspects he saw without seeing. Hirsch and Spitzer search for a yellow star that signifies not a single murder (for these people survived), but a genocide. Their paper faithfully adheres to Antonioni's script, and to its end result. "We played," they tell us, "with the enlargement's resolution on the computer in Photoshop. . . . This *must* be the yellow star, we concluded. . . . We blew the picture up even more, then again, and even more—yes, of course, it had the shape of the Jew star."<sup>11</sup>

Barthes sympathizes with the desperation of this search, and with the desire for truth at its heart. But he also cautions us to discount the end results of any such inquiry:

I want to enlarge this face in order to see it better, to understand it better, to know its truth. . . . I believe that by enlarging the detail "in series" (each shot engendering smaller details than at the preceding stage), I will finally reach my mother's very being. . . . The Photograph justifies this desire, even if it does not satisfy it: I can have the fond hope of discovering truth only because Photography's noeme is precisely *that-has-been*, and because I live in the illusion that it suffices to clean the surface of the image in order to accede to *what is behind*: to scrutinize means to turn the photograph over, to enter into the paper's depth, to reach its other side (what is hidden is for us Westerners more "true" than what is visible).

9. See Geoffrey Batchen, "Camera Lucida: Another Little History of Photography," in *Photography Degree Zero: Reflections on Roland Barthes's Camera Lucida*, ed. Geoffrey Batchen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

10. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 85.

11. Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, "Incongruous Images: 'Before, During, and After' the Holocaust," *History and Theory, Theme Issue* 48 (2009), 22 (this issue)

Alas, however hard I look, I discover nothing: If I enlarge, I see nothing but the grain of the paper: I undo the image for the sake of its substance. . . . Such is the Photograph: it cannot say what it lets us see.<sup>12</sup>

Here, then, we are brought up against the limitations of photographs as sources of historical knowledge: "the photograph cannot *say* what it lets us see." Equally, I might now add, it cannot always let us see what we want it to say. Hirsch and Spitzer want to see the Holocaust in their chosen photographs, and of course they do so, with a little effort and a lot of distortion. But this is not the only story to be found in these particular images.

It's not that the Holocaust is not the truth of these photographs. We know, from other evidence, that it is. It's that this particular truth turns out not to be what they'd like it to be—namely, a revelation of unremitting evil. "It was actually not an unhappy time," say both Lotte Hirsch and her street photographs, thereby forever complicating the postmemory of her daughter, and indeed of all future historians of this period.

Hirsch and Spitzer's paper bravely faces up to this complication by reminding us that our fascination with photographs is based not on truth, but on desire (our own desire to transcend death) and on faith (in photography's ability to deliver this end, in the face of all the evidence to the contrary). As they confess, "perhaps, ultimately, [these street photographs] tell us more about what we want and need from the past than about the past itself."<sup>13</sup> Their account of street photography in Czernowitz thereby amounts to an interpretation of photographs as dynamic modes of apprehension rather than as static objects from the past that veridically represent it. It is precisely this aspect of photographs that makes them such unusually complicated, ambiguous, and incongruous historical objects.

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12. *Ibid.*, 99-100.

13. Hirsch and Spitzer, "Incongruous Images," 23.