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Modernity in the Photographs of Eugène Atget

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An abstract of
A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the
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Abstract

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By Anna McKittrick

Photographer Eugène Atget is known for his images of Paris on the cusp of significant modernization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Among scholars interested in the meaning of Atget's art, his photographs of historical subjects have set the tone for interpretation, provoking an emphasis on his supposed nostalgia for a dying or past world. In place of this consensus view, this paper suggests that Atget was centrally preoccupied with modernity, and probed it using comic elements and other hallmarks of modern visual language in his photographs. This argument applies to Atget images of historical and modern subjects, albeit differently—Atget photographed historical subjects to question if forms from the past were still valued in his modernizing world, and photographed modernity to highlight what he took to be its characteristic proliferation of similar objects and forms.

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Table of Contents

Eugène Atget (1857-1927) began work as a commercial photographer in Paris when he was around forty years old, and while his work was not widely known beyond a circle of clients during his life (and certainly not as art), after his death it received substantial attention from artistic quarters, and he has since become a central figure in the history of photography.[1] Although numerous accounts of Atget's photography have been written, none have adequately grasped one of its crucial dimensions: that Atget was largely concerned with commenting on modernity, even when depicting historical subjects. He accomplished this with a variety of strategies, among which the use of the comic, particularly irony, looms large. An understanding of Atget's humor shifts focus away from photographic elements that have been widely misread as evidence of "nostalgia." Before discussing why Atget's photographs have been viewed as nostalgic and why reassessing them with an eye for the comic is needed, a brief historiographical review of the Atget literature is necessary. Several strong arguments have been put forward about Atget's work, and reviewing them is helpful to establish the prevailing opinions that have left these aspects of Atget's work unacknowledged.

Proponents of the nostalgic reading generally accept Atget as an artist and posit nostalgia as central to the meaning of his work. By contrast, another significant argument claims that because Atget's photographs are the products of commercial practice they should only incite something akin to sociological, not aesthetic, interest. These scholars argue that Atget photographs cannot be read for artistic meaning, but should be viewed as evidence of the social systems in which they were produced and in which they participated. That is to say, the photograph is only fruitfully understood as useful—as a commodity Atget sold and others purchased. An example of how this works would be to approach an Atget photograph of a narrow Parisian street by saying: Atget photographed this spot because Parisian historical

[1] Berenice Abbott, *The World of Atget* (New York: Horizon Press, 1964), viii-xiii.

societies wanted documents of old streets at risk for being destroyed during citywide modernization. The compositional devices Atget used were chosen to represent the street in the way the client would want to see it. The resulting image was then marketed and sold to the historical societies who were anxious about the fate of streets like this one. Everything about the photograph, on this account, can be reduced to a *function*—if documenting a soon-to-be-demolished street is taken to be the purpose of the image, all questions about it must be answered with recourse to how this function is or is not served. Three major contributions have been made to this argument, although each writer's take can essentially be condensed to this thesis.

The earliest chronologically in this camp was Walter Benjamin, who wrote about Atget images and "aura," a "peculiar weave of space and time" that singular and unique beings have, but mechanically produced reproductions do not.[2] For him Atget images "suck the aura out of reality like water from a sinking ship"—and liberation from the aura saves photography, because its elimination enables photographs to offer a clean slate for "a politically schooled gaze."[3] Benjamin used an oft-repeated analogy between Atget images and crime scenes (mere traces of an event that do not name a guilty party) to suggest that photographers should "identify the guilty" in a caption and express deeper political or economic significance than the image alone can contain.[4] So for Benjamin Atget discovered and demonstrated that photography is a meaningless shell: useless on its own but capable of being purposefully marshaled as evidence.

An essay by Rosalind Krauss localized Benjamin's idea of function to the context of Atget's production. Krauss is interested in the fact that Atget coded his negatives with a system derived from library card catalogs (libraries were one client of Atget's). Since a catalog is a

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[2] Walter Benjamin, "Small History of Photography," in *On Photography*, ed. Esther Leslie (London: Reaktion Books Limited, 2015), 83-4.
[3] Ibid., 82-84.
[4] Ibid, 93; Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (New York: Prism Key Press, 2010), 18.

"system of organization," for Krauss Atget's work is "the *function* of a catalog that he had no hand in inventing and for which *authorship* is an irrelevant term." Atget's photographs were born from and intimately tied to their function in a catalog; for this reason Krauss argues that Atget images and the rest of nineteenth-century photography should be treated like a Foucaultian archive, a "set of practices, institutions, and relationships" distinct from aesthetic discourse.[5] The third major contributor to this argument, Molly Nesbit, slightly recasts Krauss' terminology (catalog and archive) into the idea of the document. Documents are defined by their "generality" and "openness," and again their practical function comes first (they are a "means to knowledge"). For Nesbit "a document was actually defined by an exchange, which is to say, by a viewer reading a certain kind of technical information from the picture and by the picture's ability to display just that technical sign."[6]

Benjamin, Krauss, and Nesbit's shared theoretical commitment to the primacy of function necessitates that interpretation stop outside the work itself. The idea that something outside the work (its function as evidence, catalog, archive, or document) renders the work incompatible with art status is inimical to any real understanding of Atget (or any other artist) because it is based on an artificial and belatedly imposed principle (e.g., documents are fundamentally non-aesthetic) instead of on the work. Another group of scholars counters this claim by arguing for the importance of Atget's intentions, yet this group falls short in two ways. The first is a failure to provide a strong account of any specific intentions, and the second (related) issue is the prevalence of nostalgic language, which leads to a misunderstanding of Atget's tone and has likely obscured the humor in his work.

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[5] Rosalind Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces," in *The Originality of the Avant Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985), 147-150.
[6] Molly Nesbit, *Atget's Seven Albums* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 16-17.

The first in this group was American photographer Berenice Abbott, who met Atget toward the end of his life and is largely responsible for protecting and promoting his legacy. In various publications, Abbott presented her account of Atget as an artist working in a specifically photographic idiom, whose contribution amounted to "a very fine portrait of the city of Paris, a vivid comprehension of French civilization and culture and of the past to which they are related."[7] A subsequent four-volume book written by John Szarkowski and Maria Morris Hambourg expanded the details of Abbott's argument while still depicting Atget as an artist fundamentally concerned with French culture.[8] As Szarkowski puts it: Atget's aim was a "systematic exploration of topics that were consciously chosen for their relevance to one abiding idea: the creation of a body of photographs that would describe the authentic character of French culture."[9] Elsewhere in the book, Hambourg addresses the view that Atget's activity was non-aesthetic (i.e., exclusively functional), claiming that the choice between Atget as a worker producing use value and an artist producing meaning is a false one.[10]

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[7] Abbott, xxvi.

[8] Their argument is certainly more nuanced; for example, both authors place greater emphasis on composition, particularly on the ways in which Atget's compositions are unresolved or contain discontinuities. Given Szarkowski's modernist interests the appeal of these formal elements is unsurprising; in fact he explicitly explores whether Atget's work can be called modernist. He notes that Atget's "confidence in the continuity and authority of culture" does not jive with the modernist sense of discontinuity, yet he also finds in Atget's images a modernist expression of the "plasticity of reality." Still, *The Work of Atget* consistently argues that the ultimate import of Atget's oeuvre is as an exploration of French history and culture, so any modernist sensibility is kept at the level of form and not considered to be vital for shaping meaning. See John Szarkowski, "Atget and the Art of Photography," in *The Work of Atget Volume I: Old France*, by John Szarkowski and Maria Morris Hambourg (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1981), 25.

[9] Ibid., 14.

[10] See Maria Morris Hambourg, "The Structure of the Work," in *The Work of Atget Volume III: The Ancien Regime*, by John Szarkowski and Maria Morris Hambourg (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1983), 9. Hambourg argues that Atget's prints functioned first as useful documents for clients, yet it was "through (not despite) the consideration and accommodation of commercial practice that his intellect, vision, and artistic abilities developed." In other words, the photographs are not art for art's sake, yet that does not preclude them from being art—Atget's artistry was in his "capacity to raise work to the highest standards of excellence."

Hambourg is correct, although not for the reason she supposes. The position she shares with Abbott and Szarkowski is scarcely better than that initiated by Benjamin when it comes to interpreting meaning in Atget's work. To say that Atget represented French culture is not far from saying that Atget provided evidence of French culture, or catalogued/archived French culture, or documented French culture.[11] Embracing Atget as an artist is supposed to enable exploration of his intentions, yet the basic meaning proposed is so dull that conviction in the artist's intentions almost becomes a mere difference in kind. "French culture" is a catch-all for the diverse oeuvre, something Hambourg seems aware of in statements such as: "Since anything Atget photographed provided evidence of the values that had shaped it and of the continuum of experience it subsequently had molded, even a profile of a banister was in some partial sense a profile of French character."[12]

This broad approach seems to be Abbott, Szarkowski, and Hambourg's answer to what Gerry Badger calls "the dilemma of Atget." Badger believes that Atget "deviated from the norm in quirky and apparently inconsequential ways, never leaving a thread that could be traced with confidence, never allowing a substantial profile of his intentions to be built up by the determinist

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[11] Besides Krauss and Nesbit, Peter Barberie is also dissatisfied with the French civilization account. Barberie virtually repeats Krauss and Nesbit in 2005; for example: "Atget made his photographs as various kinds of documentation, but many of his critics have transposed his work to the register of modernist art" (12). He also explicitly refutes the French culture argument by restating Nesbit's thesis: "this photographer did not pursue a comprehensive single idea, or even a set of related ideas, in all his work. Atget made his photographs to satisfy the precise interests of numerous clients" (9). See Peter Barberie, *Looking at Atget* (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2005). Another author, Gerry Badger, believes he is recasting the French culture argument, saying, "Thus Atget's larger theme becomes not simply the cataloging of French culture, not even a divining of its spirit (as many commentators have concluded), but a chronicling of the experience of that culture, as set down by a particularly receptive, feeling eye" (13); Atget gives us "history permeated with autobiography" (14). This supposed intervention still does not explore what meaning the intersection of Atget's eye and French culture produced; further, Abbott and Szarkowski's original French culture argument explicitly includes the essential interaction between photographer and motif. See Gerry Badger, *Eugène Atget* (New York: Phaidon Press Limited, 2001).

[12] Maria Morris Hambourg, "Notes to the Plates," in *The Work of Atget Volume II: The Art of Old Paris*, by John Szarkowski and Maria Morris Hambourg (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1982), 166.

critic."[13] Badger is correct in saying that there is no "substantial profile" of Atget's intentions on offer, since attempts to encapsulate Atget's intentions into an overarching program have bypassed substantive meaning, but he is not right to posit that it cannot be done. The interpretive focus on history and culture, likely in response to Atget's preoccupation with photographing old parts of Paris, seems like a poor stand-in for a more interesting question: since the photographs were taken in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in a rapidly modernizing city, do they offer any comment from Atget about modernity, even when his subject was ostensibly historical? Answering this question will require addressing the second issue with intentionalist accounts of Atget that was referenced, how nostalgic language has kept the "French culture" argument rooted in a poor conception of Atget's tone.

As I will show, Atget frequently photographed to question the present validity of valued cultural forms from the past, largely by juxtaposing the visual language of modernity—the graphic intensity of the advertising poster, comic approaches to a motif, compositions grounded in destabilizing oblique angles, and wide aprons of space that distance the viewer from the subject[14]—with historical subjects to depict discontinuity between past and present.[15] Rather than being entrenched in an old world, Atget was probing its intersection with a new one, and he

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[13] Badger, 10.

[14] Szarkowski and Hambourg's understanding of Atget's compositions laid a crucial foundation for this part of the argument; most commentators engage their ideas about Atget's compositional strategies in some way, although not to make this case. For example, see Ben Lifson, *Eugène Atget* (New York: Aperture, Inc., 1980), 5: "Complexity, multiplicity, even contradiction—these themes at the heart of Atget's work are not just intellectual ideas or artistic principles; for Atget, they were the stuff of experience itself." Disappointingly, Lifson drops this idea and falls back in line with most Atget scholarship: "Atget's Paris is a product of his imagination… And if his artistry belongs more to the nineteenth century than to ours, so does his theme: the transfiguring power of the imagination" (7-8).

[15] These compositional strategies align Atget photographs with T.J. Clark's "approximate definition of modernism" from *The Painting of Modern Life*: "Art seeks out the edges of things, of understanding; therefore its favourite modes are irony, negation, deadpan, the pretence of ignorance or innocence. It prefers the unfinished: the syntactically unstable, the semantically malformed. It produces and savours discrepancy in what it shows and how it shows it, since the highest wisdom is knowing that things and pictures do not add up." T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers (Revised Edition)* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 12.

depicted the incongruous ironies of this change instead of expressing wistfulness for what was becoming past. Yet while Atget casts doubt on the continued relevance of his historical subjects, he does not declare them obsolete outright. Faced with the trappings of modern life, he is similarly equivocal. Atget pointed out the abundance of things in his world—such as commodities and advertising posters—which had proliferated to such a degree that they began to lose their distinctiveness and read as near-mechanical repetitions, variations on a ubiquitous theme (when they are not actual repetitions, as they are in some cases). Again Atget's images are not resolute enough to read as condemnations; rather, he critically probes an emerging state of affairs.[16]

I will begin with Atget's treatment of forms from the past, since they appear to have set the tone for interpretations of his work. These interpretations are fairly consistent except in one notable example, a well-known image from 1901 that Szarkowski has lavished considerable attention on (Figure 1). Szarkowski suggested that Atget "was having a wonderful time" that day at Versailles. In Szarkowski's telling, Atget was "learning to make what was for him a new kind of picture, full of panache, witty high spirits, and athletic confidence."[17] The language is striking

[16] The most recent account of Atget is by Kevin Moore, *Old Paris and Changing New York: Photographs by Eugène Atget and Berenice Abbott* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018). Moore's book accompanied an exhibit of Atget and Abbott prints at the Taft Museum of Art in Cincinnati; his interest is in the intersection of the two photographers, which largely occurred after Atget's death (the players are primarily Abbott and other Atget interpreters). When Moore does address Atget it is largely to bemoan his misappropriation by American modernists, arguing that they wrongly see in the work "their own ideals" (52-3) and Atget's achievement was "as the engineer and custodian of a total archive" not as the author of "incisive singular images" (64). As the book's title indicates, Moore's Atget is Atget the historian, "an antiquarian of Old Paris" (73), yet interestingly Moore argues for Abbott something much closer to what I will argue for Atget. Moore's Abbott photographed to emphasize a "changing" New York, using formal choices that expressed her opinions about the transformation of this urban space and its political consequences (67-8). Moore seems to feel authorized to use the language of modernism, a language he eviscerates in a polemical passage a just few pages prior, because Abbott identified with it, whereas Atget may not have called himself an artist in any terms. This petty matter of definition has no bearing on if Atget's work demonstrates aesthetic sensibilities that have since become associated with modernism, and that is the question I will seek to answer.

[17] John Szarkowski, *Atget* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2000), 112.

because it is inconsistent with most scholarship on Atget, although it is an apt description of his much younger contemporary Jacques-Henri Lartigue (who would begin taking photographs in 1902, at age eight[18]). Szarkowski's "wonderful," "high spirits," and "athletic confidence" seem to have wandered in from a text about the privileged boy photographer; applied to Atget's work they fail to resonate. Atget's work is sober and reserved, with few clues to the photographer's state of mind, whereas Lartigue's early work, with its large cast of pets and playmates engaged in carefree bourgeois leisure, asks to be read as evidence of someone "having a wonderful time." What is interesting is that this image provoked Szarkowski, whose original interpretation in the 1980s was actually foundational for the somber and nostalgic consensus view of Atget,[19] to deviate into speculation about Atget's delight in this particular motif.

The Versailles photograph is nominally of a statue, which Szarkowski identifies as *L'Air*, but she shares the image with a park bench, which is odd in light of the photograph's probable function. As Szarkowski notes, there is no reason that "the artisans, archivists, and *amateurs* who bought his pictures would have felt ill-served" by this image had Atget omitted the bench to privilege the object of more obvious interest (the statue was the likely focus of clients' paintings, historical records, personal image collections, etc.). Szarkowski reasons that Atget's competitors in commercial photography would have captured the statue alone, still, "Atget did something audaciously different; he gave equal billing to the bench."[20] In this Szarkowski is correct; the bench is unlikely to have held the interest of Atget's clients and the image would scarcely gain in

[18] Kevin Moore, *Jacques Henri Lartigue: The Invention of an Artist* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 45.
[19] Szarkowski's early take on Atget is perhaps best stated in his introductory essay to *The Work of Atget's* first volume: "The demeanor of his work—its air of rectitude and seriousness—and the quality in it of wonder and deep affection persuade us of Atget's untroubled faith in the coherence and logic of the real world. Poetic intuition was the means by which he served the large, impersonal truth of history." See Szarkowski, "Atget and the Art of Photography," 26.
[20] Szarkowski, *Atget,* 112.

use value through the juxtaposition of bench and statue. And while the image does not support the sense of exuberance that Szarkowski sees, it does demonstrate one word he misguidedly conjoins to "high spirits"—witty. The inclusion of the bench cannot be explained by an appeal to Atget's commercial photography practice; yet its place of honor is an amusing nonfunctional choice that offers a different conduit to understanding the image.

Giving an unobtrusive bench, present so visitors can rest while viewing more important things, equal compositional weight as a statue certainly displays wit. The two examples of man-made stonework are depicted as kin: both are situated along a dense hedge, at an oblique angle on a light ground, surrounded by black foliage that appears to be stamped into an empty sky. Both pieces of stonework appear weighted and immobile, and the light plays off them such that their white surfaces have moments of extreme brightness as well as deep shadow. Therefore, the pair is the most visually detailed and tangible moment in the composition; much of the rest of the photograph reads as simple texture (the hedge) or even as cutout shapes in a single color (the ground, sky, and foliage). It is as if the bench and statue are riffs on Renaissance chiaroscuro, placed in a space that has been stripped to the minimum forms and colors necessary for it to be descriptive—as in the visual vocabulary of the newly-ascendant advertising poster.

In a sense, the image proposes exactly this juxtaposition, and asks: what is it to look at images of classicizing grandeur in 1901's visual landscape, and do these dated subjects hold any more cultural value than the bench one sits on to look at them? As Ian Jeffrey has observed, statues in Atget photographs seem to come alive,[21] yet for all the vitality that Atget gives to *L'Air,* he also undercuts her liveliness by emphasizing that she is rather pitifully stuck on a

[21] Ian Jeffrey, *Photography: A Concise History* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1981), 140. Jeffrey writes, "These old statues, come alive in the woods, provide clear evidence of Atget's abilities as an animator." Jeffrey sees this animation as emotive: "His are the photographs of a sympathizer who felt for a sculpted figure of Winter, wind-blown under a bowed fir tree in the unkempt park at Sceaux."

massive pedestal, rooted forever next to the bench, her raised arm shading blank eyes that look out against the flat black of the foliage. Her theatrical gesture and windblown drapery are not grand; the drama of the statue is emptied by her banal surroundings and she looks overwrought, even amusing. Also amusing is the visual equating of these two forms. By arguing that a statue constructed to withstand time (as it has done) is in some way equal to a bench constructed to be used by individuals for a short time, the values embodied in the statue are challenged through conflation with a representative of the fleeting patterns of modern experience. (Perhaps it will turn out that *L'Air's* cultural value is as fleeting as one's stay on the bench.)

Szarkowski does not bear down on any of this, and follows his observation about the bench's status with: "Once [the bench] has been given a prominent place in the cast it is irresistibly tempting to assign it also a place in the plot: were there star-crossed lovers who slipped away at Atget's approach, or royalists plotting a coup d'état, or perhaps a poet writing of the primacy of Air, and of how she scans the horizon in search of Fire, Earth, and Water."[22] It is easy to drag Szarkowski's flight of fancy out of context and critique him for being as overwrought as *L'Air's* scan of the horizon, yet Szarkowski's resort to romanticized language (as opposed to letting the photograph's reserved wit set the tone for interpretation) is not an isolated occurrence. This sort of language appears in writing about Atget with some frequency: something about the photographs provokes visions of doomed love and poets; romanticism creeps in even among writers who openly disavow one virulent strand of it, nostalgia.[23] Roughly

[22] Szarkowski, *Atget,* 112.

[23] The idea that Atget's work is nostalgic received criticism fairly early on, in one of Hambourg's essays in *The Work of Atget*. She writes, "the gravity of his undertaking has been misread as nostalgia;" however, her own writing in the same essay treads into sentimental, if not overtly nostalgic, territory. For example: "He saw the city couched in the natural—Notre Dame appeared thorough the trees, Sacré Coeur disappeared in fog, the Luxembourg Palace was overrun with flowers—and in the country, where nature was normally sovereign, cultural relics and the photographer's memory imbued every landscape with history." See Hambourg, "The Structure of the Work," 26-7. We might ask why Notre Dame is *appearing*

defined, I mean by "nostalgia" language that assumes Atget had a sentimental view of the past. It might be as simple as saying that he loved Old Paris, or that he approached the *châteaux* with reverence—whenever an account connects Atget's depiction of something out of date with authorial projection of Atget's positive or wistful sentiment about this thing, nostalgia is in play. Why this occurs is outside the scope of my project, still, a few thoughts will be posed.

Scholars could reasonably be reacting to the distance between Atget and a photographer like Lartigue. In implying that Atget photographs are subdued (statues in a park) rather than vibrant (jumping kittens and fast cars), critics are certainly responding to the images. Generally speaking, Atget images are still, quiet, and unpeopled, without the bustle and movement Lartigue was notorious for capturing. Yet somber does not equate to *sentimental*, and can still encompass wit or humor, among other things. However, descriptions of Atget's photographs tend to avoid more than passing reference to humor[24] and instead steer straight into sentiment, particularly when discussing how Atget photographed fading aspects of French culture. For example,

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through trees rather than being *screened* or *obscured* by them—Hambourg chooses the traditional motif of nature mingling with culture, and sentimental ideas like "relics," "memory," and "history" to describe the images instead of a more modern motif such as obscurity or inaccessibility. See also Badger, 96. He agrees that calling Atget's work "nostalgic in tenor" is incorrect, but only because Atget frequently photographed modern life as well as Old Paris.

[24] For example, see Barberie, 44-51. He writes that "Atget exaggerated on occasion, deflating Versailles' overblown grandeur with visual repartee" and goes on to discuss several examples. His point is that "Atget liked a good visual joke," and Barberie claims that Atget offered "a witty rebuke to pretense." To say that Atget was rebuking pretension for the sake of doing so is a shallow stab at meaning, and the idea of "jokes" misses the sobriety of the images (again, lighthearted "visual repartee" is a better fit for Lartigue). While they can have amusing elements, there is a coolness in Atget's photographs that Barberie's brief treatment of humor does not account for—the possibility that the comedic is used in service to serious meaning is not considered. Badger makes a more nuanced reference, although he does not see humor as central to how the photographs convey meaning: Atget took "evident delight in the serendipitous visual oddities and incongruous juxtapositions thrown up by his camera," while remaining on the whole a "profoundly serious and sober photographer" (102). See also Jeffrey, 140-1. Jeffrey calls Atget an "ironist" or "satirist" because he identifies "discrepancies," such as "humble business carried on under ornate classical ornamentation." However, Jeffrey does not give the discrepancies a particularly central place in the meaning of the images, because Atget "was not simply a satirist, mocking the pretensions implicit in fine titles. His concern was for culture itself, seen in the light of the raw material from which it was devised."

interpretations often emphasize that Atget gives us decaying *châteaux*, parts of Paris about to fall victim to modernization, or people working in Paris' street trades at a time when those *métiers* were approaching extinction.[25] The fact that these subjects were nearing their end, however, is not enough evidence to attribute any particular feeling about that fact to Atget; yet frequently authors seem to be arguing that Atget's primary interest was lovingly capturing old cultural forms being menaced by modernity.[26] In the case of the statue at Versailles, the amusing comparison with the bench (that she dwarfs in vertical height and complexity of carving, yet somehow ends up equivalent to) is not particularly elegiac or even reverent. Silhouetting the statue against a black field is also a rather cold and stark choice, not one designed to hold the statue up as a beloved vestige of a dying era.

Despite viable questions about the presence of sentiment in Atget's photographs, this understanding of Atget is prevalent even among other photographers. Abbott, concluding the introductory essay to her 1964 book on Atget, writes: "He will be remembered as an urbanist historian, a genuine romanticist, a lover of Paris, a Balzac of the camera, from whose work we can weave a large tapestry of French civilization."[27] While she is less explicit than others about nostalgia or wistfulness for a past world, what Abbott does see in Atget—an interest in history, French civilization, love for his city—are all grandiose, and as she says, rather romantic themes.

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[25] For one of many examples, see Gordon Baldwin, "Plates," in *In Focus: Eugène Atget* (Los Angeles, CA: The J. Paul Getty Trust, 2000), 12. He writes of a 1898 image of Paris, "Atget's quest for the architectural remnants of the past embedded in the fabric of the city of his time led him to photograph the domed corner of this deceptively small building… Atget's instinct to photograph the building as a souvenir of the past was prophetic, for it did not long remain as it was." Or, of a statue in the gardens of Versailles from 1921: "Thus the picture becomes a meditation on youth and age, on the inevitable decay of both flesh and stone, on time and the passage of the seasons" (68).

[26] A particularly blatant example of this is Lifson, 10. "And into this artifice that Atget builds out of the past come small hints of the modern world—automobiles, billboards, electric light bulbs, new fashions; just enough to tell us that this fiction is a reverie about a dying era…Versailles is often grey and desolate; a beautiful reflecting surface is also a sewer; Gothic angels have decayed with time; graffiti covers Louis XIV's marble statuary… Insofar as Atget's work is a fiction, transfiguration is poetic; insofar as it describes reality, change is threatening. Melancholy, shifting, dying; yet, Atget's work is still consoling."

[27] Abbott, xxxi.

Minor White, writing in 1956, is more direct in his insistence that Atget's interest was exclusively in the past. He writes that Atget "strolled through the city in the 20th century to seek out those places that were still in the 19th," that "He had no interest in photography as an art of progress," and most significantly, "His real ghosts, and his personal dream lurk in the most solid parts of his pictures: these parts that preserve the feeling of a century just passed, which was, for him, the present."[28] White envisions Atget as a figure almost literally transposed into the past, or at least as one moving through the 20th century with an eye for that which did not belong to it, which explicitly dissociates Atget from his modern world.

While we cannot know what Atget would have thought of these kinds of readings of his work,[29] there is a demonstrable lack of sentiment in the images that begs for their reassessment. Atget may have agreed with another later admirer, Walker Evans. Of accusations of nostalgia in his own work, Evans is reported to have said: "I hate that word. That's not the intent at all. To be nostalgic is to be sentimental. To be interested in what you see that is passing out of history, even if it's a trolley car that you've found, that's not an act of nostalgia."[30] The vehemence with which Evans rejected the idea that his photographs evince nostalgia is straightforwardly due to the fact that this interpretation misunderstands his intent. What Evans does not directly address, but which might also be behind his adamant rejection of this interpretation, is that nostalgia is troublesome because it is a particularly insidious misreading. Once "nostalgia" gets attached to a body of work, it can be deployed to answer every question that might arise about individual photographs, and becomes a surrogate for meaning in the images. So critics can say: Atget photographed a lampshade vendor because he was sorry the trade was dying; photographed a

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[28] Minor White, "Eugene Atget," *Image* 5, no. 4 (April 1956): 76-83.
[29] Information regarding Atget's opinions on any topic is sparse, and he said and wrote little about his work. As Badger has put it, "In having the perspicacity to leave no manifesto, except for two or three enigmatic sentences, Atget ensured a field day for posthumous interpretation" (4).
[30] James R. Mellow, *Walker Evans* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 214.

narrow street because he was sorry it was going to be razed, widened, and straightened; photographed an urn because he was sorry vandals had scribbled on it. This reading can end up with a death grip on interpretations of an artist by neatly making sense of a vast photographic output while declining to look for deeper meaning.

If nostalgia is discarded, wit emerges as one guiding component of the tone of Atget photographs of historical subjects. Atget's use of comic elements here corresponds to the definition of the comic given by Charles Baudelaire in his 1855 essay "Of the Essence of Laughter." While it is impossible to know if Atget read Baudelaire (he was supposedly a voracious reader), the two seem to be in sympathy as far as the nature of the comic. At the outset of his essay, Baudelaire raises an imaginary objection to his own attempt to define the comic, pitched as coming from the "unsmiling pedagogues," men who "were the worthy folk who let the comedy of Robert Macaire pass them by, without seeing in it significant moral and literary symptoms."[31] While it cannot be decisively determined if Atget also saw moral and literary symptoms in the comedy of Macaire, it certainly occupied a prominent place in his conception of comedy—when Atget, a former professional actor, was asked at the end of his life to reflect upon his stage experience, he offered his role as Robert Macaire as the summation of his career. Atget also delivered local lectures on theater, and from the available evidence Hambourg surmises that the focal point of these discussions were comedies that align with Baudelaire's interest in the social or moral implications of the comic: "Atget did not lecture about the theatrical arts in general, but about comic drama that challenged accepted values and addressed the true nature of

[31] Charles Baudelaire, "Of the Essence of Laughter," in *Charles Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, ed. Robert Baldick and Betty Radice, trans. P.E. Charvet (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 141.

social institutions, particularly French ones."[32] For both men, it seems, the comic that is worthy of study is the comic with social import, the comic as a vehicle for social critique.

A further point of interest is that for Baudelaire contemporary men "possess more comic resources than pagan antiquity" because of the connection he sees between laughter and Christian morality. Laughter is a "profoundly human" consequence of the fall, and "since laughter is essentially human it is essentially contradictory." Laughter is a sign of human inferiority to the divine but superiority to other animals, and although this duality is contradictory, both aspects actually mark laugher as fundamentally "the consequence of [man's] idea of his own superiority" (man's idea of superiority is, of course, connected to his corruption after the fall).[33] What is vital to capture from this definition is less its Christian dimension, which is not particularly relevant for Atget, but rather that Baudelaire implicitly associates the comic with modernity. He does not denounce the comic, despite the moralizing overtones of his definition. In fact, the "wealth of comic themes" available to a society increases as its "superiority increases" relative to the "primitive;" the availability of comic themes may even be "one condition of our general intellectual power." Therefore the potential for the comic increases "constantly" in proportion to the advancement of mankind, whereas "Venus, Pan, and Hercules were not figures of fun."[34]

It is consistent with Baudelaire's ideas that Atget should have the artistic capacity to turn Venus, or *L'Air*, into a figure of fun from his superiority-laden vantage point. Baudelaire thought the comic could be intentionally created, and had specific ideas about this creator:

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[32] Maria Morris Hambourg, "A Biography of Eugène Atget," in *The Work of Atget Volume II: The Art of Old Paris*, by John Szarkowski and Maria Morris Hambourg (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1982), 22.
[33] Baudelaire, 148-9.
[34] Ibid.

> Artists create the comic; having studied and brought together the elements of the comic, they know that such and such a creature is comic, and that he is comic only on condition that he is unaware of his own nature; just as, by an inverse law, the artist is an artist only on the condition that he is dual and that he is ignorant of none of the phenomena of his dual nature.[35]

In calling the artist "dual" Baudelaire refers to his previous assertion that the artist has "the capacity of being both himself and someone else at one and the same time," and as such artists can draw the comic "out of themselves for the enjoyment of their fellow-men."[36] This means that the artist, unlike the unknowing object of laughter (e.g., the man who trips and falls), is able to be amusing *and* be aware that he is amusing. Since the artist who creates the comic is self-conscious, he is able to communicate this humor for the enjoyment of others. Atget seems to embrace a similar definition of the comic to Baudelaire's on all these counts. Because of his belated historical position relative to many of his subjects, he was able to find comic that which formerly had not been, and from this superior vantage point he could photograph to create witty connections between inert subjects for the purpose of social critique. As an artist, he was able to generate the object of laughter (the photograph) while remaining aware that he was intentionally making, for example, a humorous juxtaposition.

One example of Atget's comic use of classicizing statuary has been offered, and many of his photographs of statues are enlivened to similar effect. For example, in 1926 Atget photographed a statue in the middle of a pool at the Trianon at Versailles (Figure 2). The image is the kind that Atget interpreters tend to romanticize as elegiac, due to its dark atmosphere pierced at the center by blinding sunlight coming through the foliage, illuminating a statue of two putti as if light from the heavens shines upon them. The light falls on the upturned face of one putti, and the trees in the background slant away from the sculptural group as if they are curtains

[35] Ibid., 161.
[36] Ibid., 160.

being drawn to reveal divine light. Upon closer inspection, however, it seems as though Atget is parodying this kind of romanticized sentiment. Rather than ennoble the putti, the grand setting renders them miniscule and almost ridiculous since Atget has clearly shown their spindly, rather industrial-looking support. No elaborate carved pedestal for this pair; they are sitting on a framework that looks like scaffolding drawn with hard black lines. To make matters worse, the effervescent light has also caught an industrial tube attached to the sculpture group; perhaps the sculpture is a fountain and water is drawn through this appendage. Whatever its function, it appears to be metallic and is pointed directly at the viewer in the center foreground of the composition, yet at a slightly oblique angle that draws the eye back to the putti and their support apparatus.

Because Atget captures the support with graphic simplicity and clarity, and because the sculpture is hemmed in an algae-laden pool despite the vast space it inhabits, the putti's smooth face awash in sunlight is more amusingly histrionic than poetic. The graphic quality of the support structure is also found in the massed foliage and the patterned surface of the pool. It has occasionally been noted that pictorial elements in Atget images appear to be graphic;[37] however, interpretation stops short of the obvious comparison to the visual language of the advertisement.[38] There is certainly some distance between Atget's work and the instantaneity of

[37] For example, in a transcript of a 1999 colloquium on Atget one participant, Françoise Reynaud, briefly speaks to this aspect of the work; immediately after she finished the moderator concluded the discussion. See "Documents for Artists: The Photographs of Eugène Atget" in *In Focus: Eugène Atget* (Los Angeles, CA: The J. Paul Getty Trust, 2000), 134. Reynaud said: "I think many of Atget's photographs are very graphic, that he's not always a three-dimensional artist. Some of the other images he made at the fairs are also very flat, and some of the carousels are very graphic, with almost no depth."

[38] Hambourg makes several passing references to qualities that could be called graphic in Atget photographs, centrally around his depictions of foliage. For example, in "The Structure of the Work" she discusses the "lessons" Atget learned from Versailles: "First, Atget learned to simplify his compositions by giving parts of the picture over to wholly unified tones, either very dark, as in the slightly underexposed hedges and trees, or very light, as in the brilliant skies and water surfaces. Much of the tonal massing was accomplished with the hedges, against which the white statuary stood beautifully revealed" (18). Further, in "Notes to the Plates" in *Volume II* she suggests that Atget's vision got more

posters and other forms of mass media, yet Atget seems to be exploring the ways that the camera can play with that simplified, attention-grabbing language to demonstrate that the putti are being considered from the vantage point of 1926. Atget photographed so the dense and visually complex park surroundings are not rendered as layers of intricate visual information but rather as a drastically streamlined proliferation of patterns and textures. Juxtaposed, the classicizing putti fountain's implicit claim to be a valued cultural form appears to be as shaky as its obviously more contemporary base.

As with *L'Air,* the gravitas of Atget's questioning of the fountain's cultural value is mitigated slightly by its comic plight. While it is fair to say that Atget is asking a serious question, since it is asked with a nod to humor the image's tone is not bleak. Atget photographs to suggest that the putti might now be trivial, not something pathos-heavy like "doomed." Many of the sculptural forms Atget photographs are enlivened in ironic or amusing situations that similarly ask if the sculptures are trivial in the twentieth century, yet Atget always stops short of giving his subjects a definitive sendoff to obsolescence. For example, the combination of *L'Air* and her bench was not a one-time compositional choice; Atget actually used this motif again in 1904, with a bust on a tall pedestal positioned next to a sweeping semicircle bench (Figure 3). As can be said of the previous use of this pairing, Atget's wit is subtle and does not make a wholesale mockery of the statuary; neither does an image from Versailles in the same year that

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"reductive, geometric, and stringently formal" between images taken at the same location in 1907 and 1912. She suggests that this paralleled "the use of geometric forms and the increasingly restricted palette and subject matter of Cubism between 1907 and 1912." Although she believes Atget "doubtless knew" of avant-garde painting, she cannot say if he would have been aware of similarities between his formal attitudes and theirs (184). The suggestion that Atget may have failed to recognize similarities between his compositional strategies and those of his contemporaries in other media is unfair; parallels such as these are frequent enough to be significant and deliberate. However, the reference to Cubism specifically seems misplaced. Similar formal choices appear in earlier work (as in Figure 1, from 1901), and while Hambourg's reference *applies* to Cubism it does not speak to the essence of Cubism's project (which in a good account should include its negotiation of the picture plane). The qualities she mentions, however (geometric simplicity, restricted palette and subject matter), are the essence of advertising imagery.

pairs a statue with two contemporary chairs, one of which has been toppled (Figure 4). Similarly, Atget is invested in the majesty of a lion statue at Saint-Cloud in 1922, yet the lion is also rather ferociously protecting a stone ball from no particular threat and looks out over a less-than-wild domain—a pleasant, well-manicured pond (Figure 5). The same sense of gentle amusement applies to a statue of a woman in a *château* from 1910, who appears to be reacting with extreme surprise to an admittedly enormous chandelier (Figure 6). All of these photographs share a genuine interest in animating the statuary and demonstrate close attention to lighting and framing. Even though this is ultimately put to comic ends through juxtapositions, it would be incorrect to argue that Atget decided modernity has eliminated the cultural weight of the statues—instead modernity has shaken the traditions that these statues represent, enabling Atget to see something humorous in what had formerly been solemn.[39]

All of the images of statuary cited above utilize the same kinds of graphic devices discussed in connection with *L'Air* and the Trianon fountain; it is worth noting that this connection to the simplified, emphatic graphic style of the advertisement is not a purely formal one. Posters are frequently shown in Atget's Paris; one photograph of Atget's workroom (where

[39] The idea of juxtaposition in Atget images is not a new one, although it has not yet been used to refer to the effect I am describing. In his review of the literature on Atget, Szarkowski quotes from a 1930 essay by Waldemar George that referenced juxtapositions. See John Szarkowski, "Understandings of Atget," in *The Work of Atget Volume IV: Modern Times*, by John Szarkowski and Maria Morris Hambourg (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1985), 14-5. The line from George is: "Atget understood the potential and meaning of facts juxtaposed, confronting each other without any logical line to justify their juxtaposition." Based on this, Szarkowski credits George with making the earliest "attempt to suggest the technical basis (the photographic strategy) on which Atget's content rests." George/Szarkowski are writing about the haphazard combination of unrelated things that one encounters in daily life, which can be made meaningful by photography: George calls this "banality" and relates it to Surrealism; Szarkowski argues that Atget "included what in categorical terms might seem foreign, in order to present with greater clarity and boldness those patterns of experience that defined his meaning." Rather than juxtapositions that imitate "patterns of experience" wherein one is exposed to a variety of unrelated facts without a "logical line," I am interested in intentional pairings of related visual forms and languages—the forms of a cultural moment that is becoming past and those of a new one that is emerging.

he also received clients)[40] includes what appears to be an advertising poster high on the wall to the viewer's left, likely selling some kind of liquor (Figure 7). French parks were particularly fertile ground for Atget to experiment with the visual style of such imagery because of the abundance of trees, which lent themselves to the kind of formal plays that Atget seemed to be interested in. The frequency with which Atget photographed trees has been the subject of much critical attention—Abbott, for example, believed that Atget both animated the trees and saw them as a symbol for himself, since the trees had also "survived the blows of time and fate."[41] Hambourg is less interested in the trees per se, but is heavily invested in the relationship between nature and culture: "The taste for ruins, which sprang from a belief in the power of nature to reclaim what man had civilized, pervaded nineteenth-century thought, and this Romantic concept was one of the abiding tenants in Atget's vision of the countryside."[42] Abbott's concept of the trees accords with Hambourg's nineteenth century Romantic vision of nature's tenacity, where the frequently bare branches of Atget's trees perhaps symbolize their persistence in the face of struggle and years of weathering—as if the trees were battered Millet peasants.[43]

In fact, Atget's trees—the leafless ones in particular—seem to be frequently used as graphic compositional forms. One striking example from 1925 at Sceaux (Figure 8) is far closer to an awkwardly composed Cézanne tree than anything from the Barbizon school.[44] Atget placed

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[40] Hambourg, "Biography of Eugène Atget," 19-20.
[41] Abbott, xv.
[42] Maria Morris Hambourg, "Notes," in *The Work of Atget Volume I: Old France*, by John Szarkowski and Maria Morris Hambourg (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1981), 159.
[43] The recent exhibition at Cincinnati's Taft Museum of Art (*Paris to New York: Photographs by Eugène Atget and Berenice Abbott*, on view October 6, 2018–January 20, 2019) took a more ominous, though no less romantic, tact. The wall label for one of Atget's 1901-2 photographs of the Jardin du Luxembourg declared, "The trees here show their bare branches, symbolizing life's decline toward death."
[44] It should be noted that this image is an exceptionally clear example of a sensibility that appears less explicitly in other tree photographs. As Badger notes, "This seems to be one of the most purely formalist images ever taken by Atget" (106). Be that as it may, it is odd that it has not yet spurred reevaluation of other Atget trees to see if it is less an anomaly and more a clue to understanding how trees worked for Atget.

the tree dead center, truncated at both the top and the base, and framed the top left corner such that a small rectangle is formed within the image by the top edges of the photograph and the tree, marked through with an "X" out of tree branches. While the connection to avant-garde painting gives a better idea of the image's sensibility than the offered perspective of expressive nineteenth-century landscape, the tree in Figure 8 seems to be used for a purpose that is closest to the simplified visual language of the poster. The tree is immediately arresting and seems to sit on the picture plane, as if it has been drawn on top of the pond lined with unkempt trees visible behind it. While the tree trunk is textured, the light coming from behind the branches in the top left corner renders the rectangle within the picture and the "X" particularly flat.

The photograph argues that trees can be drained of Romantic associations and used graphically, and since the tree is superimposed over a rather melancholy pool that evocatively mirrors the trees around it, Atget challenges this kind of romanticized landscape through juxtaposition (the "X" is particularly connotative in this vein). Szarkowski comes closest to understanding the potential for trees to be used as modern visual forms when he associates them with Atget's "profoundly photographic understanding"[45]—in the sense that Atget is exploiting the potential for actual trees to be transformed into compositional elements by photography he is correct—although when Szarkowski writes about this image in particular he aligns with the sentiments of Abbott and Hambourg.[46] At Sceaux the tree is being used graphically in direct comparison to more traditional landscape imagery behind it; this pictorial strategy is also used in

[45] Szarkowski, "Atget and the Art of Photography," 16.

[46] This photograph has special resonance for Szarkowski; both *Volume III* of the original book and his 2000 book on Atget conclude with this image. He admits to this preference in the "Notes to the Plates" in *Volume III:* "It seems to this writer that in [Atget's] first thirty-odd years he never made a picture quite so perfectly just and unfamiliar as this one" (179). His rationale for the preference emerges in the 2000 book and seems to be rooted in something like Abbott's idea of Atget's affinity for trees: "At sixty-eight, at seven o'clock on a gray March morning, he may have felt a special kinship with this particular pine—a tree scarred by life and slighted by time, eccentric but still vital and compelling—which should be photographed perfectly, in a way that would match, or echo, its own unrepeatable identity" (220).

images where Atget depicts trees, often rendered as a web of mere flat black lines, to screen or obscure forms with historical and cultural resonance. In a 1905 image of the Château de Sardou (Figure 9), a tree on the left-hand edge is essentially a black cutout shape from which a mesh of twisted black lines sprouts. The branches seem to be screening the top of the *château*; in fact, the largest cluster of branches has been photographed so that it seems to run along the roofline, as if it is threatening to crop off the top of the building. Similarly, in two of Atget's rare views of Parisian landmarks from the 1920s, Notre-Dame is seen from considerable distance and is obscured behind trees that are a mass of flat black lines (Figures 10 and 11).

None of these images are as invested in the particularly of what lies behind the trees as Atget was in animating the statuary, yet they still refrain from disparaging what is obscured in the background. These images are certainly ironic—imagine a client asking for a photograph of Notre-Dame and being presented with Figure 10 or 11—in their sly refusal to give appropriate billing to the main attraction, but their tone is not scathing (the photographs are still elegant, after all, and the background structures have a hazy look that is not unflattering). Nor are these photographs a deflation of traditional subjects for the sake of doing so, because Atget's combination of the look of modernity with views of an older Paris comments on the current state of affairs in his modernizing early twentieth-century city.[47] The mingling of old and new, and the friction between past and present, is a leitmotif in the Atget images of Old Paris, yet not simply in overt ways such as when Atget depicts old buildings plastered with posters or automobiles

[47] Atget's Paris was 30 or 40 years beyond the Haussmannian one Clark describes in "The View from Notre-Dame:" "In the 1860s and 1870s, what seemed to impress the new painting was the city's arbitrary and unfinished character" (24). Yet Atget's Paris was no less arbitrary or unfinished. As Nesbit describes: "Interest in Vieux Paris had been revived at the end of the century with the decision to go ahead with the subway. The idea of digging up Paris immediately panicked the city's antiquarians, who remembered all too well the devastation that had accompanied the Baron Haussmann's urban renewal during the Second Empire, and they called for the protection and documentation of the old city" (62-3).

parked in front of crumbling façades.[48] Merely showing the literal coexistence of old and new does not suffice as a comment from Atget about this state of affairs. In a limited sense it speaks to Atget's interests since he did not deliberately exclude combinations such as these from his photographs (Nesbit has rightly argued that antiquarians would have preferred that he omit modern distractions[49]); however, from these parings alone one can say only that Atget was attracted to Paris' partial and unfinished modernization.

Using compositional techniques, however, Atget was able to ask similar questions of Old Paris as he did of classicizing statuary. Critics often note that Atget leaves a wide apron of space in the foreground of his photographs of city streets, and that most Atget street views tilt slightly, with the buildings shown at oblique angles. These strategies have not yet been connected to the notion of distancing or destabilizing the photographer/viewer, an idea that is more aligned with a modernist lack of resolve or "discontinuity" (to use Szarkowski's phrase) than the traditional explanations offered for these devices.[50] The viewer is not given solid, impenetrable views of an

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[48] In Szarkowski's literature review, "Understandings of Atget," he quotes a 1968 essay titled "Atget and the City" by John Fraser at some length. Fraser explicitly disagrees with the idea that Atget compares the past and the present because of his "astonishing poise, his continual voracious interest, curiosity, wholly unsentimental love and respect for so many different forms of existence, his Rembrandtesque ability to treat in exactly the same spirit the conventionally beautiful and the conventionally sordid" (25). Fraser's opinion is far from "unsentimental," and seems to miss the reticence, irony, and disjunction in Atget's work in favor of arguing that Atget would never pit past against present because of his affection for all he saw.

[49] Nesbit, 110. "Atget lost respectability with the Vieux Parisiens because of these kinds of details. He had not distinguished sufficiently between past achievement and modern debasement."

[50] Hambourg, for example, sees the apron of space and the oblique angles as natural or authentic responses to Atget's motifs. The angles are "from a pedestrian's point of view more natural," even though they are an anathema to proper architectural photography, and the apron of space "provides imaginative access and conveys that the space is easily inhabitable, even contiguous with our own... it derived from the photographer's authentic, sentient response to the world in which he was home." See "The Structure of the Work," 16. As an aside in his "Notes to the Plates" in *Volume III,* Szarkowski notes that even Atget's images of Parisian doors are taken at vaguely oblique angles. He reasons that the angle may have been advantageous for capturing the right "quality of light" or that parallel lines "simply seemed rigid and boring" (161). Others touch on these ideas briefly: Barberie suggests that the foreground space "confer[s] an otherworldliness on whole scenes" (12); Badger suggests the opposite, since viewers are given multiple entrance or exit points in the photographs: "It also provides a psychological sense of ease and

Old Paris resiliently withstanding time, but a Paris at arm's length, vaguely off-kilter; Atget's is often a rather fragile-looking city. The distance and imbalance help the photographs maintain the same semi-detached tone that has been observed in other images, so that once again Atget comes off as equivocal, not exactly mourning a victimized Old Paris but doubting that this Paris will continue to stand in the twentieth century.

Frequently Atget's foreground apron of space comes at the expense of including the tops of buildings, which can have an unsettling effect. In an image from 1901 (Figure 12), the street takes up about a third of the photograph's vertical space. The street is pale, flat, and almost completely lacks variation in tone; it intersects with a side street that runs away from the viewer down a narrow alley that is dissolved by light at the end. The building of interest is shown at an oblique angle in addition to being cropped at the top, which accentuates its unstable and fragmentary appearance. Because Atget has positioned his camera to capture many oblique angles within the rectangular print, the more one looks at the image's internal geometries the more they seem to shift. The focal building appears to be listing to the viewer's left, or even warping along the left-hand edge (it begins to look as though the edge is convex). The building's one visible corner and the curb alongside it seem to pull forward into the empty street, which accentuates the visual recession of the curb on the viewer's far left, where a lone observer sits and stares at Atget. Atget's spaces, angles, and even the light that obscures the end of the

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intimacy, a feeling that we might like to inhabit the picture" (50). In the transcript of the 1999 colloquium on Atget several participants reference the foreground space as something that enables the viewer to enter the space, which shows Atget's "empathy" for the viewer's position. See *In Focus: Eugène Atget,* 129. Due to the conversational format these comments stay surface-level, yet Robbert Flick seems to be approaching the right idea when he says: "this is not a photograph about what has been—the picturesque—but an image about that intersection [with where you locate yourself]."

alleyway decontextualize this portion of the Parisian street; collected into a print these fragments of buildings and spaces become a play of uncertain internal visual relationships.[51]

This combination of destabilizing compositional choices occurs throughout Atget images of Old Paris—for instance, twenty-five years later in 1926 he made an image that again includes foreground space, crops rooflines, and utilizes diagonals (Figure 13). Here the focus is the intersection of two streets; their wet paving stones seem to weave slightly, and since they are not level water has pooled at a low point where the two roads meet.[52] A haze of light in the center highlights the tilt of the building on the viewer's right-hand side, and the building on the left side seems to be rising up and listing to the right, as if it is going to tip into its neighbor. It is difficult to locate the buildings on either side of the intersecting street in space; it seems as though they do exist along a straight line although their sidewalks and curbs do not run parallel to their façades.

Even when Atget does not fragment spaces by depicting partial buildings, the foreground space and the oblique angles still work to distance and destabilize. In 1907 Atget captured a spindly-looking building in full, removed from the viewer by a vast stretch of street (Figure 14). The building is already tall and thin, but at a distance and angled slightly it seems like a strong breeze might cause it to shift further to the viewer's right, an effect accentuated by the blank sky to the left and the line of surrounding structures pressing in on the right, which make it look as

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[51] It is perplexing that Szarkowski in particular remains stalled in a sentimental view of Atget's work, when he succeeded in at least referencing much of what makes it unsettling rather than a reverent sendup of French culture. For example, Szarkowski's 2000 *Atget* includes the phrase: "[The photographs] are never quite perfectly resolved in their sentiment—contradictions are not edited out. They are disinterested—free of special pleading" (19). Or, in the "Notes to the Plates" in the 1983 *Volume III,* "Here as elsewhere, Atget's preference was for the oblique, the tangential, the fragmentary" (164). It seems as though Szarkowski noticed these features, but ultimately did not think that they were the point of the images, or even particularly crucial to understanding their meaning.

[52] While it has been my experience that sustained attention makes the paving stones appear to slide and waver, Badger sees them as a welcoming aspect of Atget images that increases immediacy. He writes, "It emphasizes the paving stones, a recurring feature, marking his vision as a particular depiction of the urban walking experience" (22), or "the paving stones which draw us easily into the picture space and the world within" (30).

though a space is being opened up that is shifting everything toward the print's right-hand edge. The dramatic foreshortening of this central building features it from its thinnest side, which makes it look as tenuous as possible. While these effects collectively render the portions of Paris that Atget depicts unstable, they do not explicitly refute the myriad arguments about how Atget was a curious and engaged observer of the old city. He certainly seems to have been, the problem is when interpreters suggest that Atget's engagement with Old Paris came from a place of reverence or patriotism. The photographs do speak to how Atget saw the city, and what they suggest is that Atget saw an uneven, disjointed city, perhaps with an uncertain future.

Because Atget did not shy away from depicting old buildings that had become backdrops for advertising posters, his photographs of Old Paris also lay the foundation for understanding his interest in the proliferation and repetition characteristic of his modern world. Atget chooses views where the proliferation of things of one type has lessened their uniqueness, such as when there are enough posters (or commodities, or whatever else) that they stop reading as distinct beings and instead get lumped together as a visual group. He is also interested in instances of repetition—as will be shown, Atget frequently captures duplicate items in a single image and makes the fact of their repetition obvious. Atget's examples of proliferation and repetition are never so profuse that the photographs become overwhelming, however, although the effect is often comical. Because of this, Atget seems to be withholding judgment once more, subtly noting a concerning abundance of similar items without expressing outright disgust at this aspect of modern life.

Proliferation to the point of visual massing is evidenced in a 1924 image of a Parisian street (Figure 15), which also utilizes distancing and destabilizing compositional techniques. A lone vehicle, positioned as if it were almost the vanishing point in a perspectival composition, is

the most arresting moment: in addition to being the end point of a series of orthogonal lines, it is massive and dark with small bright white highlights. Outside the automobile the image is hazy, which accentuates the sense that the trail of posters on the building is rising like smoke from the vehicle. Added in vertical layers, likely extending as high as someone on a ladder was willing to go, the posters do not ask to be considered as individuals but rather seem like a mass that is in some relationship with the automobile, an effect accentuated by the white-on-black lettering of the license plate that rhymes visually with the lettering on the posters. The distinctiveness of any individual poster is subordinated to the misshapen growth of white-lined rectangles, and Atget's distance from the motif helps the posters resolve into this shape, particularly because their white outlines pull them collectively away from the dark brick.

This is a useful image to begin to demonstrate how Atget saw the proliferation of things as a symptom of modernity because the automobile is suggestively connected to the mass of posters (the automobile was a sign of modernity that Atget largely avoided until the 1920s[53]). Once identified, this theme crops up across Atget's contemporary Paris, in examples of both general proliferation and of outright repetition. Repetition of posters is an advertising technique, since pairing two or more identical images can make them particularly eye-catching. Paired and repeated posters frequently appear in Atget photographs, but this is more than a reflection of contemporary advertising strategies. As Figure 15 demonstrates, Atget was able to photograph posters in a way that mitigated their graphic intensity and prevented them from becoming individually arresting moments in the print, yet Atget tends to call attention to the repeated posters. In a 1911 photograph Atget certainly could have given more prominence to the supposed subject (the Hôtel Nicolai), but instead the viewer is drawn to two identical Lion Noir posters

[53] John Szarkowski, "Notes to the Plates" in *The Work of Atget Volume IV: Modern Times*, by John Szarkowski and Maria Morris Hambourg (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1985), 158-9.

that appear cropped in emphatic black and white on the left-hand edge of the print (Figure 16). Because the posters are at the "low" point of the street's oblique angle, they are positioned at viewer's point of entry; further, they are rendered crisp and readable ("Lion" is not exactly readable since it is incomplete, but this poster makes many appearances in Atget images—including in Figure 15—and is easily identifiable).

It is difficult to tell which part of the Hôtel Nicolai this image is supposed to do justice to, because it actually features the posters that have spread across every usable space on the wall, save the frame of the entryway. While there is an apron of space, it is not as dramatic as in some Atget images, so many of the posters are readable—further, as the eye follows the diagonal of the street back into the photograph one encounters another pair of duplicates ("Printemps" is legible). The sharp lettering and white outlines of all the posters make them stand out above anything else in the image—Atget highlights their comic proliferation across the wall (it is more amusing still that the several inches of space around the entrance have been spared) as well as the obvious instances of repetition within this mass. Additionally, the juxtaposition of the posters and the *hôtel* has a similar amusing temporal dimension as the one seen in the juxtaposition of *L'Air* and the bench—the grand, authoritative *hôtel* is being encroached upon by posters, a hallmark of ephemeral modernity. Still, the posters are not overpowering: they are confined to the wall and in this case the apron of street actually helps to balance out the visually frenetic wall of layered posters. The piling of the advertisements on top of one another (it becomes evident that this has occurred when one looks at the bottom edge of the wall) accentuates the chaos on the wall, but the rest of the image is quiet and still, suggesting an emerging state of affairs, not the resolute takeover of a new era.

There are other examples where it seems as though Atget would have to have realized that the focal point of an image would be the posters because of their graphic clarity—for instance, one image from 1906 (Figure 17) includes two identical, highly arresting black posters with a vibrant white burst in the center positioned side by side. Or consider a 1926 image of the Boulevard de Bonne-Nouvelle (Figure 18), wherein the boulevard can scarcely compete with the magazine stand and adjacent structure covered in posters (two of which obviously repeat). One of Atget's most emphatic examples is an early image, from 1899 (Figure 19), which contains both an instance of repetition on the right-hand edge and an entire street corner that could be the poster child for advertising proliferation run amok (still balanced, it should be noted, by the series of dark cutout-shape forms on the left edge and the empty space of the sidewalk).

It is easy to understand why antiquarians would have found Atget's modern inclusions distracting in these cases—they stand out graphically, and at times Atget seems more interested in the way the posters are papering over the city (and each other) than in the ostensible historical subject. This generates the same friction between past and present that has already been discussed, and this time there is a literal as well as a visual layering of new over old; however, it also seems to be indicative of something further because emphasis on the repetition and proliferation of forms is a feature of so many of Atget's images of modernity. Perhaps even more than others, these photographs feign a kind of objectivity (we might be tempted to say that forms simply *were* proliferating and repeating and Atget captured this fact by default), however, Atget seems to be both seeking out examples of this theme and photographing in a way that emphasizes the humor in this facet of modernity.

Atget's famed photographs of shop window displays have received considerable attention (from early Surrealist admirers, notably). Not all critical accounts understand the images as mere

examples of Surrealist found-strangeness (evidenced, for example, in the reflections in many shop windows), but critics who suggest otherwise typically end up arguing that Atget was interested in commerce or merchandise display,[54] an explanation that does not account for Atget's framing. Depicting shop displays in any format would suffice to say that Atget was interested in commercial activity—the views could be closely cropped or distanced like the street scenes, could include entire storefronts or mere fragments, and could show actual transactions taking place or not. Atget has a clear preference for the close cropped, mostly unpeopled fragment, which is not necessarily the most intuitive way to depict commerce or even displays of merchandise. Instead, it seems as though Atget photographed to focus on the *things* involved in commercial transactions, minimizing their context. While this does not nullify the argument that Atget had a special interest in these displays, it is a feature of the photographs that existing accounts fail to explain. It is also a feature that reads as vaguely comic, since Atget appears to be focusing on groups of commodities that nominally offer the consumer choices, yet here they read as a mass of numerous and pointlessly varied near-repetitions of the same form.

[54] For some, this is political. See Nesbit, 160. She concludes that these Atget images "dwelt upon the unruly volume of lower-class commerce; they preserved its swell, its spoils, its superabundance, its germs, its good value." Therefore, "We are given to look at these pictures from the ungainly position of the shopper, and even more specifically, the working-class shopper. The viewer of the album was plunged into the one commercial world that did not exist for the sole purpose of serving bourgeois need." Badger takes a watered-down stance: "Consumerism was always an important part of this [the life of the city] for the photographer, partly because it was clearly part of the urban theatre, possibly because the political Atget was acutely sensitive to the oil that greased the city's engine" (114). Baldwin puts a slight twist on the idea and identifies Atget's "interest in documenting how merchandise was purveyed" (16), specifically his "attention to the ways merchandise was presented on the streets of Paris to potential consumers, particularly of the working class" (46). He describes this sentimentally during the colloquium: "If he is thought of as being a photographer who had a passion for describing things that were about to disappear, I wonder if he was acutely conscious that the styles displayed in the 1925 picture were not going to be the styles of 1926 or 1927" (116). Characteristically, Szarkowski's take in the "Notes to the Plates" in *Volume IV* is apolitical; he underscores the nineteenth-century popularity of depictions of commercial and vernacular life (normalizing Atget's choices) and concludes that, as Atget did with other motifs, "He began by trying to describe clearly his knowledge of the ordinary, important facts of his world, and he never found it necessary to revise this view of the problem" (156).

Baudelaire, however, is less helpful for understanding how repetition can be comic than another French writer, Henri Bergson, whose *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* originally appeared as a series of three articles in 1900. Bergson's basic definition of the comic is that "The comic is that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing, that aspect of human events which, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of movement without life."[55] For Bergson humor is always tied to life, and it is the conflation of life with the mechanical that is generative of comedy. Repetition is a critical comedic tact for Bergson because "The truth is that a really living life should never repeat itself," so repetition is associated with the mechanical and automatic, and when it appears to characterize life it is a source of comedy. However, Bergson's definition does not require that a literal living man be the locus of comedy, since, for example, society can generate the comic. In the case of society, "we are both in and of it, we cannot help treating it as a living being… [the comic] is formed when we perceive anything inert or stereotyped, or simply readymade, on the surface of living society. There we have rigidity over again, clashing with the inner suppleness of life." In the same vein, certain things are vulnerable to be comedic: "we perceive how easy it is for a garment to become ridiculous. It might be said that every fashion is laughable in some respect" because clothing is a rigid covering for the living body.[56]

Fundamental for Bergson, as it is for Baudelaire and Atget, is the social component of the comic. Bergson's take is that comedy functions as a social corrective:

> But, on the other hand, just because laughter aims at correcting, it is expedient that the correction should reach as great a number of persons as possible. This is the reason comedic observation instinctively proceeds to what is general. It chooses such peculiarities as admit of being reproduced and consequently are not indisolubly [sic]

[55] Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic,* trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd, 1911), 87.
[56] Ibid., 34-44.

> bound up with the individuality of a single person,—a possibly common sort of uncommonness, so to say,—peculiarities that are held in common.[57]

Atget's view of the comic in modernity has much in common with Bergson's definition—Atget isolates instances of mechanical repetition or near-repetition, ones amusing for how thoroughly they have covered "living" society (garments themselves are a popular subject, as will be shown) with rigid sameness. And as with Bergson, Atget highlights the comedic aspect of this phenomenon both because it has social import (as a possible corrective, although Atget's images are characteristically subdued and do not openly advocate change) and because Atget isolates repetition as an aspect of modern culture that he wants to depict as general, as one held in common by diverse groups of people.

Atget photographed storefronts throughout his career, but it was the images from the 1920s that the Surrealists found particularly evocative; for example, Figure 20 is a frequently reproduced image from 1925. However, the reflection in the shop window and the rather eerie mannequins are not the most visually pronounced parts of the photograph: what actually makes the most emphatic statement are the white cards indicating prices on the items in the window. As in other Atget images, the graphic clarity of these bright, basic shapes makes them stand out even in parts of the image given over to the fuzzy reflection of the street behind Atget. Their repetition also unites the varied items on display—although it is the function of the cards to indicate the differences in price along the row of trousers (and the fabric colors are slightly different), it is as though many iterations of the same white card have marched across the row and subordinated individual differences in fabric or color to the unifying symbol of the card. Because Atget captures the window as a close-range fragment, he seems to have severed a small part of an endless row of suits and separates (crucial for the comic aspect of the photograph); as it stands

[57] Ibid., 170.

these items entirely fill the part of the window Atget captured. Even when Atget crops displays less abruptly, his photographs poke fun at the expanses of visually similar items, sold by businesses that were established on the premise of presenting consumers with an array of supposed choices.

One image from 1926 depicts a wider view that still suggests the proliferation of nominally different things depicted as near-repetitions (Figure 21). The white cards indicating prices remain visually arresting; here they take over a sea of hats to the viewer's right and a rack of something unidentifiable in the back left. Price cards appear on both the several rows of hats outside the shop as well as on many more hats layered directly behind them in a front window; this window seems to dissolve at the bottom, creating the humorous illusion that the indoor hats are spilling over and cascading into the outdoor ones. The hats are something of a swarm, again in different fabrics and colors but united by the repeated white cards. By capturing this shop at such a dramatic oblique angle the outdoor hats are positioned as if the viewer is about to trip over them, and the same angle creates a parallel between the cards in the front and those arranged on the grid of items in the back. In the intervening space are more forms that appear to be nearly identical—a line of boots, the round knob "heads" on a group of mannequins—in all, Atget arranges this image to depict the items on display as groups of similar forms that once again fill the entire space of the picture.

Earlier images of commercial displays also depict a sprawl of similar things expanding across space. In the 1920s Atget's cropping is often rather extreme, as in the fragmenting of the window in Figure 21, yet even in earlier images Atget frequently crops displays mid-object to ensure a sense that the items continue beyond the edges of the print. For example, a secondhand bookseller photographed in 1910 or 11 (Figure 22) is purveying a veritable explosion of books

(she has even prominently displayed at least two sets of duplicates toward the print's left edge, the most obvious of which has a cover that reads "Minette" in black letters on a light ground). Atget emphasizes the expansiveness of this display by cropping it on one side; further, the books' proliferation is accentuated by their attempted visual confinement between two darker rectangles—awnings above and the base of the display below—since the books seem to be breaking out of these bounds (they are piled up almost higher than the awning in places, and several are suspended from string to hover over the base). Atget made the same compositional choices to emphasize expansiveness in a 1906 image (Figure 23). Interestingly, twenty years prior to depicting the hats Atget generated similar indoor/outdoor confusion with a multitude of bottles, since it is nearly impossible to see the glass panes of the storefront.

Still, as has been noted, Atget images do not overwhelm—and a mass of objects that visually overwhelms the print would be one strategy to critique a society for its overabundance of things. In 1935 Berenice Abbott took an image titled *Newsstand* in New York. Abbott was photographing a bigger newsstand than anything Atget encountered, yet crucially Abbott crops the stand so that the viewer is given hardly any space that is not cluttered by an assortment of publications lined up in a multitude of overlapping layers. Here the titles and images on individual publications do little but add to the visual clutter of the stand as a whole, and the fact that many of the magazines are repetitions is not apparent except upon close looking. They do not even read as repetitions of a standard form, but as an explosion of meticulously rendered details that the viewer could never make sense of (a rather pathetic-looking man on the left edge does not stand a chance). Although Abbott claimed early in her career that she wanted to "do for New York what Atget did for Paris,"[58] in this image at least she makes more of a definitive statement than Atget did in similar images, perhaps even an overly obvious one. The mistake is

[58] Moore, *Old Paris and Changing New York*, 27.

to ignore Atget's statements about modernity because of their subtlety. He did not make emphatic, polemical statements about his contemporary world and instead took up the mantle of the concerned observer; nevertheless, he used these socially-motivated comic choices to interrogate Paris, making certain rhythms and patterns visible—if not to offer a corrective, then to suggest the need for one.

The person who has come closest to grasping this aspect of Atget's work is Hambourg. She was referring only to the very late work, but what she wrote applies to all of the images of modern subjects discussed. For her, these photographs (including those of "boutiques" and "displays") "possess the knowing deadpan humor of perspicacious social observation… [these images] had become a mirror of modern man's moral physiognomy."[59] The identification of humor and her intuition that Atget was closely observing something of the mores of contemporary Paris seem correct. Still, since Atget does not offer explicit condemnations of commodity culture, Hambourg seems to reach too far with "modern man's moral physiognomy." She then makes the same leap as many commentators and says that in these photographs "the aspirations, needs, and fantasies of the Parisians emerged in telling and poignant disguise."[60] The compulsion to read the consumers into the commodities is a curious one, particularly because Atget avoided photographing the actual bustle of commercial life and instead depicted a vast number of available objects, which are a visible manifestation of an economic system but not of the economic *life* that swirls within it.

In fact, the system itself may be precisely the point. Most authors make some attempt to grapple with Atget's political beliefs, although none have done so as extensively as Nesbit. Her book's second half attempts a Marxist reading of Atget through discussion of the seven formal

[59] Hambourg, "The Structure of the Work," 26.
[60] Ibid.

albums that he composed out of his photographs, six of which were for the Bibliothèque Nationale.[61] Atget is strongly suspected to have held leftist views, and Nesbit believes that his political beliefs informed these albums,[62] although her theoretical position prevents her from suggesting that Atget produced any meaning along these lines. Still, Nesbit argues that the albums, while remaining the "first set of links in the chain of someone else's knowledge," use their inauspicious position to "investigate the stratification of modernity. They began to fixate on the way in which the lows of modernity established themselves, their details, their identity, their difference."[63]

Vital for Nesbit, as for most interpreters discussing Atget and class, are his photographs of the lowest rung of Parisian society, the ragpickers: a group dwelling on the margins of Paris, subsisting by collecting, sorting, selling, or repurposing the city's garbage. Nesbit believes that in these images (among others) Atget was able to save the idea of labor from being co-opted into systems of bourgeois knowledge and resist picturesque ideas of the poor; instead labor is "shown as a difference having cultural properties of its own and an insularity." She argues that when Atget photographed ragpickers he "represented their symbolic control of themselves; he did not have his camera dominate." The "steady looks and blurs" of the ragpickers as they suspiciously watched the photographer or moved during the exposure set them at a remove, so Atget's photographs "cut the passage of form to knowledge… Another modernity, dark but not degraded, slipped into view, a modernity that shadowed all the gaiety on the boulevard, picking up its trash: the shadow knew, it looked, it smiled, and then withdrew. Rags were freedom."[64]

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[61] Nesbit, 101.
[62] Ibid., 113.
[63] Ibid., 116.
[64] Ibid., 173-5.

It perhaps seems like a nice thought, although it is not. Historically speaking, we know as well as Nesbit does that the modernity of the ragpickers was degraded, and rags were not freedom. Nesbit's stance is that Atget photographed in a way that refused to capitulate to these economic facts and instead established the ragpicker as an other, a class marked by difference yet in control of its identity, undertaking a form of labor that could be pictured as separate from controlling bourgeois visions of the picturesque poor or the degraded poor. That is to say, for Nesbit Atget's achievement was in depicting the ragpickers without engaging the ideological trappings of the economic system that perpetuated their oppression. The system, then, is not the point for Nesbit, instead the point is that Atget has "freed" the ragpicker from appearing to be subject to this system, and produced images that would resist being used in the system. Yet the historical problem, and the historical point, is that because the ragpickers fell on the wrong side of the class system they *were* subjected to devastating economic consequences, knowledge production and systems of representation aside. Nesbit imagines that Atget had a fantasy of a world that was otherwise, and let the poor body forth on their own in defiance of their status (she goes so far as to say that he pictured them as "renegades"[65]); I will argue that Atget's achievement was instead in successfully suggesting the presence of the controlling system that led to the oppression of the ragpicker in the first place, and to which Atget and the ragpicker were equally, though differently, bound.

Atget implies the participation of every Parisian class in the same economic system by marking varied forms of modern life—from elegant clothing shop fronts to used book stands, as well as the dwellings of the ragpickers—with the defining element of his modernity: the proliferation and repetition of things. This could be called an application of Bergson's idea of the social generality of the comic, although it is perhaps easier to read the comic into the neat price

[65] Ibid., 175.

tags on trousers, or even an explosion of used books, than a sea of rags and junk. Crucial for Bergson is that the comic requires a stilling of emotion: "I do not mean that we could not laugh at a person who inspires us with pity, for instance, or even with affection, but in such a case we must, for the moment, put our affection out of court and impose silence upon our pity."[66] Therefore, we might say, the ragpicker cannot be a comic figure because surely, to Atget as to us, he is a pitiable one, to such a degree that our emotion could not be satisfactorily set aside.

Atget's photographs, however, do not invite sympathy toward the ragpicker. In one of the most-reproduced images (Figure 24), Atget uses the familiar apron of space in the foreground, which distances both photographer and viewer from the ragpicker's dwelling. There is no suggestion of intimacy between the implied subject and the photographer; rather, Atget is most interested in the stuff of the dwelling, in viewing the dwelling as an accretion of various (debased) things. There is scarcely an inch of the structure that does not have another material layered on top of it (reminiscent of the advertising posters): the top of the door, propped open by a spindly chair, is constructed from several vertical strips of different materials, fabric hangs over the roof in several spots, a variety of items lean against the structure's base, and some sort of pipe, as if in imitation of a chimney, sticks out of the roof. Most significant is the absurd collection of battered toys, dolls, and stuffed animals that appear to be decorating the doorway, a vertical sprawl expanding in a cone shape away from the crawling vines to the roof above. The unseen occupant has elevated a rather ridiculous combination of items to the status of mock deities, presiding over the hut as if to ward off evil spirits. Even if these items did in fact have some spiritual purpose, Atget does not treat them with reverence; the light flaring behind the rooftop nudges toward mockery of the sentinels, putting a halo around the toy cat, stuffed sheep,

[66] Bergson, 4.

and their bizarre companions. The humor in this assortment of items hinges on the fact that no actual occupants are shown—imagine a child in the doorway, and pity once again dominates.

Nesbit is correct that this is not the picturesque poor, yet Atget's interest seems largely to be in the multiplication of similar things, which, rather than separating the ragpickers as a unique group, characterizes Atget's Paris across class lines, highlighting the participation of all at different levels of the same economic system. This goes deeper than the fact that the trousers and animal-totems are both numerous and the focus of their respective photographs—the point is not to suggest unity or uniformity between classes. Rather, the point is that the same system that made the trousers numerous also made rags and junk numerous, that the same commodity culture which gave a menu of repetitive choices to one class reduced another to picking through its repetitive leavings. The comedy here, then, has all the social bite that both Baudelaire and Bergson are interested in, and Atget aims to translate a general observation about modernity that structures the lives of photographers and ragpickers alike, although with wildly different results. Atget photographed his own living quarters, among other middle or working class interiors (plus a bourgeois interior or two), and it is not incorrect to read the sprawl of small busts, statuettes, and framed artworks in these spaces as being crucially different from a motley collection of dolls missing limbs. Yet one should not feel sorry that the ragpicker cannot also own a Chardin reproduction (as Nesbit points out, two subjects of Atget's interior views have given pride of place to the same Chardin[67]—it appears to be *Boy with a Spinning-Top*); instead of inciting sympathy Atget tries to highlight the structural connection between the accumulation of books and candlesticks and the accumulation of rags.

This kind of social critique would have been circling in leftist discourse during Atget's time; it had already appeared in Karl Marx's first volume of *Capital*, originally published in

[67] Nesbit, 120.

1867. The ragpickers would fall into what Marx calls the "disposable industrial reserve army." This "surplus population of workers is a necessary product of accumulation or of the development of wealth on a capitalist basis," yet not only is this population a product of the capitalist economic system, it is "a condition for the existence of the capitalist mode of production." The surplus meets industry's need to address "the possibility of suddenly throwing great masses of men into decisive areas [which are new or in need of expansion] without doing damage to the scale of production in other spheres." Further, the existence of an unengaged reserve army of labor functions as "competition" for the working class, since awareness that there are bodies ready to replace the workers "forces them to submit to over-work and subjects them to the dictates of capital."[68]

The reserve army encompasses every worker who is partly or fully unemployed, and the ragpickers would appear to belong to Marx's "lowest sediment of the relative surplus population," the "lumpenproletariat," characterized by extreme poverty and illegal means of survival (the given examples are "vagabonds, criminals, prostitutes"—Atget also, it is worth noting, took a series of photographs of prostitutes).[69] In short, Marx argues that even people who appear to be outside of the economic system are actually central, even necessary, cogs in the system's general exploitation of the worker. This idea would have been available in Atget's political circles, and by using proliferation to connect all classes Atget seems to be making a visual case for it.

Virtually any of Atget's ragpicker photographs suffice to demonstrate Atget's interest in proliferation in these images, since many are overwhelmed by an abundance of scraps and rubbish. One example from 1913 (Figure 25) also includes a repeated element—there are

[68] Karl Marx, *Capital (Volume I),* trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 784-9.
[69] Ibid., 794-7.

multiple stacks of what appears to be bound sheets of paper, labeled "Ecole Pigier" on the edges: they are piled on the far left-hand edge, behind the ladder, and in two smaller stacks in the center (herein lies the comic: the *Ecole* was, and is, a private school network in Paris and abroad[70]). Compared to other instances of Atget's interest in repetition, this is the most chaotically arranged group of disheveled items; still, the repetition within the stacks, and the visual correspondence between these stacks and a bound group of newspapers on the ground, enhance the sense of this space as a purposeful accretion of various things as opposed to a random collection of debris. The pieces of twine hanging from the roof function in the same way; their purpose is unclear but they have been spaced such that they seem to have been deliberately strung up.

None of this is to say that the ragpickers stacked or hung things for the sake of repetition; surely they did not, no more than shopkeepers attached price cards to hats for the sake of repetition. Yet price cards were attached to hats to display their commodity status, and stacks of paper were collected as part of the livelihood of another class within the same economic system. What may appear to be accidental or random accretions of things in the ragpicker images, which perhaps makes their proliferation appear to be of a different order than the proliferation of consumer goods or posters, is in fact the low end of the same order—for the ragpicker, collecting modernity's waste was a means of subsistence. Atget noticed that proliferation was symptomatic of an entire economic system (and could be used to point to that system), and recognized that even people allegedly operating in the system's negative space were actually embroiled in it. A far cry from Nesbit's notion of the ragpicker's freedom, Atget shows their imbrication in a system that reaches all the way down.

Although the ragpicker images seem more resolutely concerned with passing judgment on modernity, there is, as always, enough ambiguity that generations of scholars have been able

[70] See https://www.pigier.com; currently the group is a private network of technical schools.

to use them with the rest of Atget's work to play out fantasies of Paris past and present. This is what Nesbit did, projecting into them Atget's evasion of a system, yet the most blatant instances of scholarly projection typically revolve around Atget's evocative images of the city. So we have Szarkowski, writing of a 1924-25 image that "This picture is less about Paris than about its generation of fans who came between the Great War and the Great Depression to sit in the cafés, contemplate life, attempt art, find love, and enjoy the favorable currency exchange. Atget made his photograph early in the morning, while they were absent" (Figure 26).[71] Wrapped up in visions of what was absent, Szarkowski missed what was present—the neat rows of gleaming, identical chairs and tables, bracketed by an advertisement for cigarettes in the top left corner and one for "Bass Extra Stout" on the right edge. The chairs are not missing Parisians; the chairs are simply there, a mass of mechanically generated sameness, spread out to fill the space they have been given. It is a peculiar reading that sees Atget images as empty (Walter Benjamin likely began this trend) simply because they tend to lack people. Instead, the de-peopling of these spaces proves how visually full they are, because the absence of the life of the city gives Atget the opportunity to ask deeper, structural questions, not about modern life, per se, but about modernity itself.

[71] Szarkowski, *Atget*, 176.

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Figure 12: Eugène Atget, *Cabaret de L'epee de Bois ou fut assassine sous la regence le financier Lacroix par le Cte. de Horn. Rue Quincampoix 54 (4e arr),* 1901. George Eastman House. https://library.artstor.org/asset/AEASTMANIG_10313040927.

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