

The art of document photography essay samples

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Introduction

Before the discovery of Atget's photography, photographs were not known as a form of documentary. Eugene Atget, who was an only child and an orphan from the age of five, started photography as a profession when he was forty years old. This is after he had been a sailor and an actor. Atget's work was not recognised until later by an American called Man Ray who introduced his work to the world thus making it popular and famous. Eugene Atget is known as the founder of modern photography and street photography. This is because his focus was on the pre-French revolutionary architecture and ornamentation. Atget was aware of Paris and its surroundings and how quickly it was changing and thus transformation. The book on Atget's photographs was reviewed by the photographer Walker Evans and the German critic Walter Benjamin. Walker says that it is not clear what vision Atget carried or the monument he left behind. However, Walker and Walter agree that Atget's photographs were ushering in a new phase of photography called intelligent documents. Walter describes Atget as a man out of his time and that is why his photographs captured his attention. The photographs helped him in constructing a counter-history of modernity, which was his interest.

Atget lived in Paris, was poor and not well known as he sold his pictures to enthusiasts of photography including the government and hawked his pictures around to studios at a very cheap price. Benjamin describes him as " an actor who, disgusted by the profession, wiped off the mask and set of removing make up from reality too." Atget was the first to change the atmosphere that had been created by conventional photography during its

age of decline. He sought for those that were forsaken, unremarkable, outcast and thus his pictures often worked against the exotic romantically deep surrounding and rich surrounding names of the cities.

Atget often passed by the "landmarks and great sights" without paying so much attention to them. What caught his attention was a table, which had not been cleared after people had left after having their meal, the courtyard of Paris, a long row of boot lasts. The unique thing about these photos however, is that they were void of human presence. For instance; the empty Paris court yard, as empty as it should be, empty the Porte d'Arceuil, the triumphal steps, all as empty as they can be. The city in these photographs is cleared out. The place is not lonely, only that it lacks mood. It is therefore in these accomplishments that surrealist photography gives an impression that denotes the affection between man and his surroundings. This gives an opportunity to people with politically educated vision under whose gaze the intimacies are given up for the purpose of illumination of detail.

Walter Benjamin argues that Atget's photographs are a crime scene. This is because, apart from Atget being a figure from the past, he was a contemporary photographer. Atget photographed a threatened Paris rather than an emerging new one and figured out the uncertainty of modernity.

Benjamin argues that as industrialisation and modernism spread in Europe, some part of history was being erased to build up dominance and support of the present and the future. Benjamin therefore, used Atget's photographs to help destroy the false continuity of history. Recht agrees that Atget's photographs are the same as the documents of a crime scene. Albert Valentin supports the idea by saying that the peripheral districts and the

dead-end streets in the neighbourhoods that Atget recorded with his lens, was a natural theatre for violent death.

Atget took photographs of unoccupied streets of Paris. This is why he is referred to as the father of street photography. Even though street photography involves images of people, Atget's photographs had no people, just the architecture of Paris. Westerbeck explains that Atget, through his photographs, was suggesting presence in the midst of absence. It can be said that Atget took the photographs of a crime scene since the scenes of a crime are often if not always deserted. Taking photographs in a crime scene is usually done for the purpose of collection of vital evidence. Atget on the other hand used photographs to come up with standard evidence for historical events and occurrences in the past and have to a keen eye, political importance that often is covert. They require a specific type of approach and not just looking at them and without an apparent focus but should be directed to a specific object. They intrigue the viewer who becomes challenged by them in a different kind of way. Captions for the first time became a compulsory requirement in magazines but served a very different purpose from the title on painting.

Apart from Atget's photography, Walker also collected other work of art that helped him in the reconstruction of history. Utrillo painted his fascinated views of Paris from post cards, not from real life. David Octavius Smyth of Church of Scotland in 1843 from a series of portraits, gave him a place in history. This further led to new technology that produced work, which was by far better than these portraits, which were anonymous images that subjects did not pose. Such was popular in painting where the paintings remained

with or were owned by particular families and occasionally people would ask for its originals. However, after generations, the interest in the photographs grew faint and disappeared. Photography on the other hand gives us something particular that could never be achieved by painters of different paintings.

The most precise technology can give the photographs it produces quality or value that a painted picture could never provide, no matter how skilled the artist is or no matter how well the subject poses, the beholder cannot resist the need to look for the tiniest bit of spot that is not conspicuous which brings back a long forgotten moment. The camera captures more of nature as compared to the human eye: other than a space informed by consciousness, gives way to the space informed by the unconscious. He gives an example of how we have a general idea of what happens in a split second as one takes a step from his current position. Photography helps us discover the existence of optical unconsciousness.

Details of structure for example cellular tissue with which technology and medicine take great concern in it. Photography reveals the smallest details, which may be revealed when enlarged, yet hide in plain sight and in "walking dreams". Blossfeldt astonishing photographs of plants brought to light details such as gothic tracery in the floss thistle that had not yet been viewed by any man. His subjects were not only shocked but were also amazed at the ability of the photographs to capture details and could also be enlarged.

Even so, at the time, Evans displayed a minor difference borne by the relationship between the artwork and document, which was a subject of

interest to Benjamin as well. His written piece “ a little history of photography” greatly depended on photographs that were taken before as a medium of information. Benjamin’s interest in photography was related closely to his objective of constructing a history of modernity out of minor details and fragments that lasted a short while. Atget comes in handy since he was a credible source or person from the past and a person who lived at the same time. Benjamin reviewed Atget’s work as a path that would help construct counter-history if not, an emblem to the same. Though its nature forbids it from looking backwards, modern progress contributed to photography. Although photography can be a proof that certain things were present at a particular time and date, it does not give us the knowledge of these things. In order to improve the images from a quaint or visually attractive nostalgia to a more meaningful work, detective work may be used to do so.

During Atget lifetime, he did not consider himself as an artist taking photographs but as a person collecting documents. The documents that he was collecting were to be an evidence of the old Paris since he was seeing that modernisation was taking away the rich culture and tradition. After the First World War, Atget wrote a letter to the government and offered them to buy the pictures or rather the documents he had been collecting for thirty years single-handed. Atget’s photographs give the modern arts the idea of making comments and passing knowledge through photography. Atget’s photographs gave the idea that modernism and industrialisation robbed the people of their culture and the beautiful, older architecture but it did not exactly say that. When modernisation was spreading, politically powerful

individuals erased some information on the history of revolution to favour and justify their activities thus little or no resistance.

Benjamin is disgusted with the fact that individuals can easily steal and keep away the truth about the history of places and countries for their own benefits. He is focused on bringing the truth of pre-revolutionary history to light by assembling works of art such as photography, paintings and sculptures to help him find the answers he is looking for. He mainly focuses on Atget's work since Atget brings into life a new phase of photography, taking photos that have meaning other than art and thus known as intelligent documents.

Atget's work has really become popular among people. It is used as an inspiration even by street photographers to use photographs as a voice of reason. Photographs taken not only by Atget are very impressive at providing information and most if not all the time, the details in the photographs are phenomenal. Atget found the niche between document and artwork and in his work; he was able to provide utility to other people even without meeting the expectations of his calling and without being able to differentiate the former from the latter.

Benjamin's argument on relating Atget's photographs to a crime scene is well supported because; Atget in his lifetime did not consider himself an artist but a detective that collected documentary evidence of the damage that came with modernisation. He mainly focused on the architecture, which no longer exists; instead, it has been replaced by modern designs and materials. The city of Paris that was once surrounded with a fresh and beautiful atmosphere is now polluted with chemicals from industries and the various modes of

transportation such as vehicles and trains. Valentin supports Benjamin's argument by stating that the photographs of the empty streets are a sign that the people have been violently killed. Apart from the war, the death of the people continues rampantly due to the discoveries of new technology that has led to the numerous, deadly illnesses that have led to the death of a large population globally.

Surrealism started in Paris in the 1920s after the World war and spread to all parts of the world. People started to understand and appreciate the works of art and the information that was contained in the work. Atget contributed greatly to the spread of surrealism mostly after his lifetime through the photographs that he took of the old Paris. His photographs contained the violence carried out on the streets of Paris. The changing of Paris came with many disadvantages since apart from a new one emerging; the old Paris was being destroyed. Atget took the photographs to preserve the integrity of the history of Paris, which was quickly fading away. His photographs are documents that are used as evidence of the destruction caused by the spread of modernisation and helps in the understanding of the history of pre-revolution. Atget's work helps in the reconstruction of the history that was erased to reduce resistance to the spread of modernisation. Other artists around the world followed Atget's footsteps through paintings and sculptors to help tell the history of different towns and cities.

The construction on new weapons and bombs, has led to the death of many during the World Wars. The nuclear bombs used have led to mutation in human beings, especially the countries that were directly hit and thus leading to unexplainable incidences such as children born without some vital

body organs. Atget had an epiphany of the destruction of the world through modernisation and put the evidence of his visions in form of photography so that the future generations can have the opportunity of imagining the healthy life before revolution.

Atget's work on photography was his main calling as discussed by the various artists. This is because it is through photography that he brought change to the world and changed to way of thinking of artistes. His career as actor and sailor did not have any great impact on the people other than self-achievement and satisfaction. Though he started photography as a profession late in his life, it has had a ripple effect globally for decades not only as a form of entertainment to the consumers of art work but also as a pictorial documentation of the history to be preserved for the future generations.

Conclusion

Photography has been victorious in art in since the 1920s to date because it dramatizes the tension between document and artwork and between its non-artistic and artistic character. This was the aim of the inter-war photography in modern art and that is why Atget is claimed to be the spearhead.

Benjamin explains in his article that photographs leave facts behind but nobody can interpret them. They give a clue that something happened or the knowledge that something existed but there is no guarantee of it. The art of documentary photography has been a big step in the improvement of photography. The connection between art and documents has led to a greater and better understanding of work done by artistes. This connection

explains the phase of intelligence photography, which Walker and Evans agree that is ushered in by Atget's work.

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