Afterimages in Photography: the *auratical* value of technology in the case of Sergio Larraín and Sebastiâo Salgado.

By Dr Jean Paul Brandt

In his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin (2008) discusses photography's profound impact on the cultural conceptions of art. He argues that the mechanical reproduction of images through technological devices such as photo cameras diminishes the unique qualities of the work of art because of an inherent lack of human/artist interaction with the immediate medium: the *aura*. With time, however, the refined definition of images has brought certain disagreement in this regard. It showed that the *aura* had left the exclusiveness of the fine arts to move into a different world, where the uniqueness of a photograph may set a new *auratical* value in the aesthetic experience of the real. For this, the case of the Chilean photographer Sergio Larraín and the Brazilian Sebastiâo Salgado help explore de importance of technological development in the relationship between aesthetics and political imageries and analyse the symbolic elements behind the uniqueness of photographic production in the mid-twentieth century.

Both photographers, like many other, benefited from the technological sedition of photography of the twentieth century's golden age of photojournalism. The development of smaller, lighter 35mm cameras and flashbulbs of the 1920s helped incubate this renaissance period for photojournalism when it first took off, where "the likes of Cartier-Bresson presented candid images of their life and times" (Violette). Although some scholars like Professor Terence P. Moran argued that the golden age of photojournalism took place roughly between the 1930s and 1950s (181), history has proven this period spans at least until the 1970s. Moreover, technology and public interest, maximized by "Culture Wars" (Levi Strauss 3) in the United States, aligned to push the field to new heights beyond this narrowed period. During these decades, nonetheless, photo-driven magazines like *Berliner Illustrate Zeitung*, *The New York Daily News*, *LIFE, Paris Match* employed large numbers of staff photographers and used the photo essay as a mean to disseminate news, at least until television sets (Hoelscher 2). It is unsurprising, therefore, finding out that Larraín was an

active participant in these magazines in the 1950s and 1960s (Leiva 57-69), as well as Salgado in the coming years.

Enjoyment of this benefit of new technologies and quick dissemination power was neither easily nor rapidly gained; it was rather complicated. Technology penetration and the manipulation of either targeted scenes or photo-framing fostered discussions about contents veracity and the value of the photographic experience. Pointing out the censorship battle over the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, Andres Serrano, and David Wojnarowicz, Levi Strauss recognizes that the political content of aesthetic images and the documentary veracity were put on public trial (Between the Eyes 3). Similarly, Liz Wells points out this period as “problematic” because the practice of "authentic documentary" in the pursuit of truth was marked by a series of conventions or attempts to validate a certain professional ethic in the field. For instance, "printing the whole of the image with a black border around it to demonstrate that everything the camera recorded was shown to the viewer. At another time, scenes lit by flash were deemed illegitimate, as only the natural light that fell on the scene should be used" (Photography: A Critical Introduction 91). Steven Hoelscher also recognises this period as critical. New technologies had disrupted the traditional means, and the objectiveness of the photographer as a witness was progressively called into question (Reading Magnum 1).

The authenticity of the photograph was at stake. However, the first generation of photojournalists of this period, led by Cartier-Bresson, was encouraged by Bresson's "decisive moment" to turn away "from attempting to record what would formerly have been seen as [their] major subjects. Instead, [they would begin] to concentrate on exploring cultural life and popular experience, and this often led to representations that celebrated the transitory or the fragmentary" (Wells 91-2). Many photographers of the subsequent generations of photojournalists, of which Larraín and Salgado were part, inherited this photographic paradigm shift and succeeded at “transcending the artificial life” (Ritchin, "Magnum History").

The *auratical* value of technology embodies this idea of transcending the artificial life Ritchin mentions. In principle, it is Bresson's decisive moment; it is also Larraín's sense of magic – or grace (Larraín Forewords); and Salgado’s electrifying moment (Jones). In each stand, the photographer seeks to compress the immediate world under postulates of producing

visual information while being aesthetically appealing. Their quest implies a sense of otherworldliness or uniqueness that the American critic Allan Sekula describes as the aesthetic photographic experience that "is thought to be art when it transcends its reference to the world, when the work can be regarded, first and foremost, as an act of self-expression on the part of the artist" (864) . Yet, it is only possible due to the technological development of faster and far more accurate photography cameras, a technological revolution that, over time and by the hand of gifted, dedicated photographers, opened artistic possibilities for photography for aesthetic exploration, challenging Benjamin's notions of uniqueness:

> Looking backward, at the art-world hubbub about "photography as a fine art," we find a near-pathological avoidance of any such questioning. A curious thing happens when documentary is officially recognised as art. Suddenly the hermeneutic pendulum careens from the objectivist end of its arc to the opposite, subjectivist end. Positivism yields to a subjective metaphysics, technologism gives way to auteurism. Suddenly the audience's attention is directed toward mannerism, toward sensibility, toward the physical and emotional risks taken by the artist (Sekula 864).

The successful introduction of the German Leica camera to the market in the early 1920s, its initial mass production and its successor models Leica Luxur and Leica Compur accounted for 60,586 units in 1925. This provoked the pioneering of photo cameras and microscopes due to their cutting-edge lenses and sophisticated technology.[1] In Pierre-Yves Donzé's studies on the competitiveness of the Japanese camera industry, the author gives insightful reflections on this regard. He proposes that the rapid growth of technological development in Germany and the emergence of the industrial nations in Asia after WW2 catalysed a competitive market in the world that inspired companies such as Canon in Japan to catch up with Germany between the 1930s and 1970s. The Japanese company attempted

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[1] The German inventor and photographer Oskar Barnack, after starting off working at Erns Leitz-Wetzlar in 1913, dedicated his spare time to building a portable camera while simultaneously experimenting with 35-mm cine films. In 1913, he finished his first prototype camera of the 35-mm Ur-Leica. Even though its production was delayed because of the First World War, the camera was finally introduced to the world market at the Leipzig Spring Fair in 1925. The outcome was successful, allowing the development of the models Leica I-III between 1930 and 1933.

with all available means to recreate and replicate Leica's technology to design and produce a "Japanese Leica". Leica technological development of high-quality cameras was so revolutionary at the time that Canon's first technician, Yoshida Goro, dismantled Leica cameras to produce accurate replicas, in what Donzé says was a "typical reverse engineering process" (Donzé 32-3).

Nevertheless, Leica cameras had already taken the market and become more than a technological device, but an object of desire. Sergio Larraín recalled when he bought his first camera in 1948: "washing dishes I saved my first money, and bought my first Leica, not because I wanted to do photos, but because it was the most beautiful object I saw that one could buy" (Sire 381). Similarly, Sebastiâo Salgado's penchant for Leica technology was so evident in his work that in time he became one of the most remarkable Leica's brand ambassadors. He even partnered with Leica Gallery Boston to present a retrospective exhibition of his work, titled Master Works (Leica-Camera). On this, the photographer points out that such technology allowed him to work with very fast films, and comments that because of this he "always close [his] diaphragm to give a huge depth of field. Volumes for [him] are very important (…) [because] reality is full of depth of field." (Jones). In both cases, the result projects an afterimage of its own and transforms the subject into a in-depth and multi-layered object.

This way, in the field of photography, the technological (and aesthetic) revolution regarding the development of smaller, more attractive photo cameras and refined viewfinders allowed the cameramen and the audience to experience life and death vividly in a way never seen before. In the article "Random Thoughts of a Founder Member", Magnum's co-founder George Rodger remembers the importance of the technical devices in the agency's early explorations. When thinking of Robert Capa's performance, the author says that "he recognised the unique quality of miniature cameras, so quick and so quiet to use (…) [Capa] saw a future for us in this combination of mini cameras and maxi minds" (Manchester 418).

Similarly, Susan Sontag, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, recognises that in their first attempts at recording wars, due to the impractical weight and size of the equipment, the camera awareness always remained outside the combat field but present in the depictions of the aftermath. She refers to the visualisation of piled-up corpses, devasted villages and traces of where the war had passed through. The author explains that this photographic practice remained the same until professional equipment was updated in the late 1930s, when the

Spanish Civil War (1936-39) was covered in a modern sense, becoming the first war to be "witnessed" (18).

Leica cameras, a brand almost patented by Magnum's photographers (including Larraín and Salgado), brought the concept of lightweight and quick-to-operate devices. The photo cameras used 35mm films to allow greater exposure of the background depth, capture the totality of the scene, and shoot 36 times before needing a reload. This new technological instrument allowed corps of professional photographers to witness war at the line of military engagement and in towns under bombardment (Sontag 19), a technology that "transformed photography forever" (Popham) says online newspaper *Independent* regarding the centennial anniversary of the Leica camera.

With no time for complex technicalities but only for action, it was as if technology had come a long way to simplify life, as many advertising slogans used to claim. Susan Sontag, when writing about the influence of technology on the reproduction of reality, acknowledges that although some image-makers were not fully aware of the implications of technology in their lives, these newer technologies provided the photographer with the means to record a continuous feed of the tragedy in the most spectacular way (Regarding the Pain of Others 96).

Even though many photographers never really gave significant credit to the technical device as such, because of it they did share and agree on an abstract sense of astonishment and critical engagement as image-makers, the same sense of "making some caustic comments on the incongruities of life" (Miller 211) that Philip Jones Griffiths mentions in *Magnum: Fifty Years at the Front Line of History* and that Hoelscher recognises to be a principle that "holds for everyone connected with the Magnum project" (Hoelscher 4).

In this regard, Robert Capa was asked in a 1947 radio interview about the story behind his most famous picture of all, The Fallen Soldier (or Death of a Loyalist Militiaman), on the Cordoba Front. The photographer recalls that they were being shot at by one of Franco's machine guns, and while jumping from trench to trench, he said, "I just kind of put my camera above my head and even didn't look and clicked a picture when they moved over the trench. And that was all. I didn't ever look at my pictures there and I sent my pictures back with a lot of other pictures that I took" (Dhaliwal). If Capa had used an older, heavier stand camera, needing longer exposure time, he would never have had the chance to take that

picture. Therefore, Capa's photograph's uniqueness can be broken down into two great approaches: the technical complexity and accuracy of his camera and the artistry, or luck, of shooting in the right place at the right time. The technological immersion harbours this *auratical* value that, after the Second World War, changed the understanding of photography as purely informative and centred on reading photography as an image with a cultural and artistic meaning (Wells 58), as in the cases of Capa, Bresson, Larraín, Salgado and many other Magnum photographers around the world.

Photography has always had to take its place within a range of discourses and visual practices. While in the nineteenth century, the truthfulness of immediate, fleeting representations of reality was one of the leading concerns of photography, the twentieth century was marked by questioning the relationship between photography and art.

For instance, when Liz Wells discusses the penetration of photography into social life, the author understands that the veracity of the camera was readily accepted in the nineteenth century because "photographs appeared to confirm ideas about the world that had been the subject of other artistic and cultural forms" (Wells 96). However, she recognises in early studies that the "debate about the nature of photography as a new technology was the question as to how far it could be considered to be art" (Wells 14).

The debate was mainly rooted in the duality of photography. Images mechanically produced and reproduced had a praised and irrefutable accuracy of reality, in which human participation is free of any discrimination affecting the capture. Aesthetically speaking, the lack of human interaction within the mechanical procedure appeared to override the artist's creativity for the critique. One of the pioneers and first detractors was the French poet, Charles Baudelaire. The author, in his 1859 essay "The Modern Public and Photography", begins by complaining that "the exclusive taste for the True (so noble a thing when limited to its proper applications) oppresses the taste for the Beautiful". Moreover, because photography can reflect the truth more accurately, this new medium becomes automatically, he continues, "art's mortal enemy" (Berman 140). It is as if photography, as a life-less tool, could not overcome the existentialism of its inhumanity, becoming a "cheap method of disseminating a loathing for history" (Baudelaire qtd. In Sontag, *On Photography* 69).

This artistic venue was first explored by the American photographer Alfred Stieglitz, regarded as "one of the most significant contributors to the history of photography" (Oden)

for his contribution to scientific and artistic studies, to help to incorporate photography into the artistic world. Stieglitz was the first to bring photography into art galleries in 1905 when he funded the Photo-Secession Group. Along with the original members, Edward J. Steichen, Gertrude Kasebier and Clarence H. White, the group pursued their goal of detaching from conventional expectations and exploring the aesthetic potential of photography. On his own, Stieglitz founded and named the first photography gallery The Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession, a name soon shortened to Gallery 291,[2] a space giving unequivocal support to young American modernist painters (Voorhies). As a result, the intellectual debate about whether photography should be considered art or not continued until the mid-twentieth century.

Even though photography was not yet officially established as a form of expression or artistic genre, the aesthetic experience regarding photography found in this period several American, European, and Latin American photographers who considered the technical device as a medium for artistic purposes. Therefore, it is unsurprising to visualize that many of the images produced within this spectrum show the persistence of both human and technology participation in the pursuit of Benjamin's *auratical* value: this uniqueness or "artistic transcendence" mentioned above regarding Sekula's comments on the artist's self-expression.

The following photograph to analyse belongs to Larraín's book *El Rectángulo en la Mano,* and it is selected for three main reasons: first, Magnum Photos still holds these images in very high regard;[3] second, because this book represents a self-manifest about Larraín's intimate approaches to photography; and third, it works to exemplify the *auratical* value in his work. For this analysis, the "Matronas" photograph is inspected under three different approaches: contextual, technical, and cultural.

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[2] "The small gallery was originally an outlet for exhibiting work by Photo-Secessionist photographers, but subsequently it became a preeminent center for the exhibition of modern European and American artists. With the aid of advisors Steichen, Marius de Zayas, and Max Weber, who had connections with artists and galleries in France, 291 became the first venue in America to show Auguste Rodin and Henri Matisse (in 1908), Paul Cézanne (in 1910), and Pablo Picasso (in 1911)", The Met Museum.

[3] The book is composed of extracts from Valparaíso series, Chiloé, Street Children, Bolivia, Peru, Bs.As, and London. Aside from the original copy of the book from the 1960s, every category previously mentioned is thoroughly kept as part of the institutional archive at the agency. Archive work, august 2019.

The "Matronas" photograph (Fig. 1) was taken in 1957, in Potosí, Bolivia, on one of the many trips Larraín took through Latin America, which Leiva recalls being a period of significant production and exploration for the photographer (Leiva 57). In this single b/w picture, very little can be said about either Bolivian cultural practices or the location as such, even though some clothes are visible. As a simple observation, it is a photograph of two women on the pavement walking in opposite directions, wearing what presumably are typical hats and *ponchos*. The clothes, however, do not portray any exclusive Bolivian custom, since without necessarily have advanced knowledge, it is relatively easy to know that in South America, plenty of native people across some southern countries have similar features. Aymaras, Quechuas, Incas, Araucanos, to name a few, are cultures to be found in Bolivia, Perú, Chile, Argentina, and other countries to the North.

Figure 1 - The matronas, Potosí, Bolivia (1957)

The information the photograph gives is only contextualised by the label "Bolivia" and, perhaps, the widespread Eurocentric knowledge of Latin America; otherwise, the photograph itself lacks any trace of contextual and historical background. In the background,

only a concrete wall fills the rest of the composition. The photograph only acquired documentary value among the rest of the series that Larraín himself labelled as "Potosí (Silver Mine Tocon) Bolivia". This documentary series held by Magnum includes 18 contact sheets with 550 single photographs.[4] The "Matronas", nonetheless, never achieved a significant impact alongside the Potosí series since it was never published as a whole. However, it appeared as a single image in the book *El Rectángulo en la Mano*, and again in every other retrospective or exhibition of Larraín's work.

This rationale leaves Leiva's notions on Larraín's explorations somewhat inconclusive since so far, the photographer's work functions only through text/image interaction. Due to the social documentary trend of the 1950s and 1960s, most of Larraín's photographs and his colleagues' works are read and understood in these terms too and by their commitment to reality (Baeza 41). They respond to a mode of representing and recording life for what it is, usually as a form of visual and textual narrative, while exploring far-distant realities. His work, although commonly labelled under journalism and documentary categories (due to its capability of revealing the real), in further studies develops a different understanding that allows the viewer to see more about the subjectivity of the photographer, an authorial gaze (Leiva 9-10).

This subjectivity is strictly related to the reproduction of visual phantoms or fragmented momentums that respond to the visualisation of *auratical* appearances of the real, possible to be captured only by technical processes of light control of newer, modern photo cameras. Larraín, like many of his colleagues, understood the camera as a tool, a medium to "solidificar ese mundo de fantasmas cuando encuentro algo que tiene resonancias en mí", from which "la realidad visible es la base del proceso fotográfico, y también es el juego de organizar un rectángulo: geometría, con el rectángulo en la mano (la cámara), yo busco. Fotografía: ello (el sujeto) dado por la geometría" (Larraín 9).

The photograph shows not only two presumably Bolivian women, but two elements under different lighting: the first one is an older woman standing in front of the camera, covered by a traditional *poncho* and completely static, as evidenced by her feet and clothes that show no movement at all; the second one is perhaps another woman, placed at the same distance from the camera as the first one. This second woman is out of focus and looks like a

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[4] Database extracted from Magnum Paris: Sergio Larraín archive. August 2019.

shadow; no significant features can be recognised for her. The background is sharply divided by the light, separating the image in two worlds about to collide: the first woman belongs to the shadows and the second to the light. However, either light or both women converge at the same vertex, creating the illusion of one shape's projection into the other. The photograph creates a sense of strangeness. Visually speaking, the scene Larraín shows is highly unusual, where the first woman looks at the camera as if posing, while the other seems to be moving straight onto the first one, even touching her, as if transitioning from one state to another.

Although not many studies are found on this particular topic, similar academic readings have been made previously on this technological exploration of Larraín. Concerning this same picture, for instance, Luis Weinstein, curator and organiser of 2014 Sergio Larraín retrospective in Chile along with Agnès Sire, recognised in a guided visit to the exhibition, that "Todo está perfecto en esta imagen y nos solemos encontrar con esta idea de blanco y negro, y de contrastes (…) Parece que fuera un doble" (SL-Exposición), emphasising this sense of dualism. Sire compares it to a similar photograph of the same series, saying that "Sergio tenía imágenes increibles. Esta por ejemplo, si la quisieramos sacar tendríamos horas de estudio para poder ver las sombras, los cuadrados, la sombra en el sombrero. Todo esto lo debe haber echo en 3 milécimas de segundo" (SL-Exposición). It is as if both were trying to understand the underlying aesthetic in the work of the photographer on Bolivia and Perú series, since it all indicates a visible pattern among specific photographs.

The "Matronas" photograph, like most of the pictures in this book, represents Larraín's self-exploration through photography, a duality between space-time and light that uses individuals as mere elements within a geometrical composition and not necessarily in a documentary sense. This phantasmagorical geometry usually escapes the common eye but not the camera's fast shutter.

In Salgado's case, as to illustrate, "Mali 1985" brings out a similar sense of strangeness. The academic Parvati Nair relates this feeling to Roland Barthes's punctum, in the sense that there is an element in this photograph that "pierces [her] heart and pains [her]" (192). The photograph is one out many Salgado produced from his travels to Africa, particularly his series "Sahel", which has been known for portraying the famine and how human beings strive only to live another day. Despite uncanny similarities in composition between various Salgados' photo-essays, in the Sahel series people seem to emulate a desperate search for escaping their reality, like this woman from the photograph (Fig. 2).

Figure 2 - Mali 1985

This is a black and white photograph that illustrates a blinded woman wearing a traditional shawl that covers her head, part of her face, and partially her upper body. The woman looks static, as if posing for the photographic act. If we did not know she is blind, it could be easily inferred that she is looking straight to the camera; to us. Her expression seems lost, as if captured by chance by the photographer; yet it communicates wiriness and anguish. The subject itself brings out from the black background due to illumination and high contrast, as in a studio set. This accentuates her solitude by fading the woman's contour with the black background. From our ethnocentric point of view, she seems distant, as someone that intrigues us for her tragic exotism, but it is impossible to really know her. As Nair claims, "The woman arrests [her] eyes and yet remains elusive to [her]" (192), what is left hence is only contemplation.

Similar to Larraín's photograph, there is no particular information that leads us to any objective interpretation of the photography true claim, since there is no real knowledge of her famine, not or even of the long and dirty road that she must have walked through. But it dwells as the afterimage of raw, inexplicable pain.

In this case, a refined definition of technology regarding lenses' accuracy and light obturation may help explain this strangeness, this dichotomic thinking apropos Salgado's images perception. Furthermore, a sense of violent unethical content was arising in the Unites States early the 20th century framed in the "Culture Wars", which has highlighted certain aesthetic features as undesirable (Levi Strauss). For example, Ingrid Sischy mentions on Salgado's work that the "beautification of tragedy" only reinforces our passivity towards the experience of tragedy. On this matter, Sischy keeps saying: "Salgado is far too busy with the compositional aspects of his pictures – and with finding the 'grace' and 'beauty' in the twisted form of his anguish subjects (…) to aestheticize tragedy is the fastest way to anaesthetize the feelings of those who are witnessing it. Beauty is a call to admiration, not to action" ("Photographt: Good Intentions" 92).

Differently, the Uruguayan journalist Eduardo Galeano promotes a different stand towards appreciating Salgado's work. He comments that "Salgado photographs people [and that] casual photographers photograph phantoms (…) Salgado photographs from inside, in solidarity. He remained in the Sahel desert for fifteen months when he went there to photograph hunger" (11). Galeano understands from Salgado's work that there is a significant effort to seeing his subjects instead of only looking at them. He takes and vindicates the work of the Brazilian and mentions Salgado's camera to establish a viewpoint where the technicality of it mixed with Salgado's intimate disposition allows revealing the light of human life and that uncomfortable truth under "tragic intensity [and] sad tenderness" (Ibid).

Unlike Sischy that labels Salgado as opportunist, she points out that "Salgado's subjects are often so weighty, and are so weightily presented, that it is inevitable that his work has come to be credited with weightiness" ("Photographt: Good Intentions" 93).

Upon these reflexions, Levi Strauss intervenes by getting closer to Galeano's approaches and claims that this disturbing quality of Salgado's work is directly related to the fracture of the social, the wounds that places the viewer at the edge of an ethical boundary (7). Because we see what we are allowed to see. This means, on the one hand, the self-reflection of some ethnocentric form of pain, and the technical specs of the artwork, on the other. When both combine is when the strangeness takes over, that aestheticization of tragedy that leads us to an afterimage charged with what is not there.

If Salgado's refined images will not account for such definition, exaltation over his dramatic shots would not harbour such impact. Because it is the technical translation of light and information what helps reveal Barthes' punctum, that *auratical* appearance that comes to us as an invisible afterimage of some distant reality.

This special quality about lighting work and emotional dichotomy reveals in the photographers' work through intriguing images that carry the essence of their technical exploration and the revelation of the *aura* that, to Walter Benjamin, are the contemporary masses' desire to bring things closer, spatially and humanly (Benjamin 9), and to Bresson, his *decisive moment*. The photographers' work hence embody this political fascination for the aestheticization of reality, utilising technology to explore multi-layered possibilities regarding photography as a way of telling visual stories with a distinctive signature. A disposition Larraín evidences in a 1988 letter to his nephew Sebastián Donoso, where he mentions that in learning "to adjust the aperture, change the foreground, saturation, speed, etc. [and] learn to play with all the possibilities your camera offers [then] you will come close to poetry" (Sire 380).

Technology, therefore, allowed photographers like Larraín and Salgado to explore a new reality from the authenticity of a moment rather than the reproduction of ordinary events towards infinity. This technological and aesthetic development of the photographic experience over time put the "old hierarchies" of documentation and art, as Liz Wells says, up for debate, trespassing onto each other with no permission or structure, "capturing information beyond that which concerned the photographer" (17), yet allowing expositive artistry in the making. The unforeseen uniqueness regarding the *auratical* value in photography is provided by the juxtaposition of artistic expression and technological means which both photographers are usually known for.

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