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Iconomorphoses : appropriation, éthique et partage - Représentations du monde hispanique actuel dans les séries télévisées

Photographing Time

Photographier le temps

15 December 2024.

Sinéad Morrissey

http://preo.ube.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=5017

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1. The Photograph as Time Machine
2. Alexander Robert Hogg (1870-1939)
3. The 'Truth' of Photographs?
4. Now You See It. Now You Don't
5. Colour too Soon? The Past as Dressing Up

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1. The Photograph as Time Machine

1 This article traces the influence of two coterminous early photographers, Alexander Robert Hogg of Belfast, Ireland (1870-1939) and Sergei Prokúdin-Gorsky of St Petersburg, Russia (1863-1944) on my own practice as a poet. I have written extensively about early photography, particularly (though not exclusively) in my collection *Parallax* (2012). The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'parallax' as the '[d]ifference or change in the apparent position or direction of an object as seen from two different points'. In terms of photography specifically, 'parallax' refers to '[a] defect in the photographic image caused by differences in the positions of parts of the camera; *spec.* incorrect

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framing of an image due to the different positions of the viewfinder and the lens.' (The Oxford English Dictionary. Accessed via: https://www.oed.com/dictionary/parallax_n?tab=meaning_and_use). My own collection *Parallax* is thus a work whose very title is a photographic term, and which functions as an extended meditation on mortality, socio-economic inequality, the ethics and aesthetics of framing, and the knowability – or otherwise – of historical fact. Originally delivered remotely as a hybrid lecture-cum-poetry-reading during the *Iconomorphoses* conference in Dijon in March 2023, what follows replicates the pattern of the original performance by interspersing the text of my own poems with explicatory text.

2 "One day, quite some time ago," begins Roland Barthes in his seminal book about photography, *Camera Lucida*, "I happened on a photograph of Napoleon's youngest brother, Jérôme, taken in 1852. And I realised then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since, 'I am looking at eyes that looked at the emperor'" (1980: 3).

3 Barthes is describing here a miracle of telescoped time. Via a photograph taken in 1852 and two pairs of eyes-cum-portals (Jérôme Bonaparte's and Roland Barthes'), the semi-mythical figure of Napoleon Bonaparte, firmly fixed in the pre-photography past, is hauled forcibly into the purview of our own contemporary moment. Through this photograph of Jérôme, Barthes experiences the shock of time flattening and coming close – to a dizzying, two-century extent. This photograph of Napoleon's younger brother is arresting in other ways, too. As with all photographs of people in the past, Barthes realises, he is contemplating the already-dead. Yet through the photograph, the already-dead are preserved, still alive and staring back at him. It is a paradox of confounding proportions.

4 In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes famously contrasts the general subject of the photograph ('studium') with the unexpected, often anomalous, detail in the corner ('punctum'). It is the 'punctum', he argues, which pierces us, flays us, which ensures the photograph remains forever irresolvable, transforming it into art, instead of mere documentary commentary. Towards the end of *Camera Lucida*, Barthes describes a second 'punctum' in operation in every photograph – time. "This new *punctum*", he goes on, "which is no longer of form but of intensity, is

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Time, the lacerating emphasis of the *noeme* ('that-has-been'): its pure representation" (1980: 96).

5 Jérôme is dead, long dead, and through the portal of his fraternal eyes, Napoleon is even deader than he is. Yet here Jérôme stands, looking out at us. It is precisely this unsettling presence of the living dead, so *piercing* for Roland Barthes, that has also inspired me.

2. Alexander Robert Hogg (1870-1939)

6 In 2010, quite by chance, I happened across some photographs taken of Belfast almost a hundred years earlier. Five of these photographs were hanging on the wall of an upstairs corridor in the Ulster Hall, a Victorian theatre in Belfast city centre. Featuring the backs of houses collapsing into heaps of broken bricks, smashed windows and yawning doorways, these images stopped me in my tracks. I examined them more closely. The photographer had choreographed the streets' inhabitants into careful groups. Most of these inhabitants were children, looking directly back at me. All of them were barefoot. Some of them carried babies. One of them had turned her head too quickly and transformed herself into a smear, or ghost. As I stared and stared, I experienced the same shock of discombobulation Barthes had experienced encountering the photograph of Jérôme Bonaparte for the first time. *I know you're dead, but you don't know you're dead*, I thought. I knew I had to write about these children.

7 Alexander Robert Hogg started out as a keen amateur photographer. A boy from a lower middle-class rural Ulster background who'd left school at thirteen to work as a chemist's assistant, his interest in lantern slides soon landed him a job with the optics company, Lizars, where his obvious talents saw him flooded with offers of work. In 1901, aged thirty, he established his own business as a "photographer, lanternist and cinematographer" in Trinity Street, Belfast (Dictionary of Irish Biography: Hogg. Alexander, Robert. Available via: <https://www.dib.ie/biography/hogg-alexander-robert-a4060>). Hogg was additionally fortunate in receiving multiple commissions from Belfast Corporation over the span of his long career, meaning that when he died in 1939, he left behind an archive of over 5,500 glass-plate neg-

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atives of Belfast and its citizens of every class spanning three decades of rapid socio-industrial change.

8 In the Spring of 1912, Belfast Corporation commissioned Hogg to photograph slum housing in the city slated for demolition, some of which was still inhabited by Belfast's poor. Through this sequence – of which the five photographs on the walls of the Ulster Hall are prime examples – we can see how Hogg was drawn to photographing working-class children in particular, ranged against the (terrible) backdrop of where they lived. The poverty and dereliction of the setting coupled with the pathos and vulnerability of the subject are doubly affecting. But is the impulse behind these photographs uncomfortably voyeuristic, or socially progressive, or both, simultaneously?

9 If we are to credit Hogg with a socially progressive impulse, as I do, then the mechanics of photography, the structures of its formal replication, are bound up closely with its intended effect. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes characterises early photography's most compelling assertion, when stacked against the beauty and luminous subjectivities of painting, as *this happened.* "Contrary to these imitations, in Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*" (1980: 76). This claim has radical implications, especially when one thinks of a middle-class viewer standing in the exact spot of the camera's aperture, in streets perhaps only a mile or two away from where she lives, but which she would never otherwise visit. *Not only are these appalling living conditions true*, asserts the photograph – at least potentially. *It's also up to you to try and change them.*

10 April 1912 was an unforgettable month in the history of Belfast. While Hogg was working on his demolition commission, the Titanic, designed and built at the Harland and Wolff shipyards for the White Star Line, sank on its maiden voyage to New York. Before she sank, the dominant international narrative of Belfast in 1912 had been one of busy industry; the manufacture of unparalleled luxury. Not only was the Titanic the largest ship ever built. It was also the brightest ship ever built, boasting lifts, a gymnasium, a swimming pool and a fully electric kitchen. The photographs Hogg took of the city in the immediate aftermath of the catastrophe are so striking partly because they are photographs of the living conditions, not of the unem-

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ployed necessarily, but of the working poor. That the people who built the largest man-made construction on earth lived in housing as degraded as Hogg exposed it to be is as compelling a tension between 'studium' and 'punctum' as death in the midst of life. For all its many superlatives, the Titanic still disappeared beneath the waves. The houses Hogg photographed, too, were on the brink of disappearing. Just before they vanished (a luxury *not* afforded the Titanic, notably *not* photographed as it sank), Hogg's camera captured these streets for posterity, for me to chance upon a century later and be amazed by.

11 If Hogg's photographs of working-class subjects constitute a cry of outrage against the staggering wealth inequalities of Edwardian Belfast, many of the photographs in his 1912 demolition sequence are simultaneously obvious aesthetic objects, carefully composed, full of striking contrasts of light and shadow. They are beautiful works of art in their own right. Is this overt aestheticization of Hogg's subject matter, especially of the children he instructed and organised into poses, unsettling? Who is photographing whom, and why? Are these images falsifying? Are they appropriative? I wrote the following poem in order to try and explore such troubling questions.

Photographs of Belfast by Alexander Robert Hogg
The year the Great Ship Herself
is fitted out
at the mouth of the Lagan,

her paneling
drilled through and threaded
with miles of electric cables

and her gymnasium
horses finally bolted
down –

fifty cubic tonnes
of soot
falls over the city

in drifts, in rain, in air

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breathed out then in again,
re-textured as dust.

He notices
the stark potential
of tarnished water

for the glass-plate photograph:
how there are slate tones
and oiliness together

and how, in standing pools
and running drains,
it coats the children's feet

with ubiquitous, gritty ink.
Alleyways and back yards
snag on his mind:

he can barely pass an entry
without assessing
the effect the diagonal

pf a porterhouse roof
beside a streetlight
might produce, whereas

to photograph a yard
on Little York Street –
its ruin of toppled bricks

and broken guttering,
the windows of its houses,
open holes –

is to cast the viewer out
onto the no-man's land
of her own estate

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and to prove the eye is banked
as much by what unravels
as by flint.

There is the tidy shop
he makes his tidy living in
selling a wallet

of possible poses
for posterity: the Father
with his watch-chain,

the Sailor on his stool.
But for this commission
from the Corporation

he's sending home
dispatches from Sebastopol
Street in which

a man by the railings
ghosts himself
by turning his head too soon.

One cannot tell
if the room in the photograph
entitled *Number 36*

is inhabited –
light from the missing
upper storey is shafted

by jutting planks,
the fire-black walls
are crystalline

and yet outside similar terraces
with crumbling masonry
and dark for doors,

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in bedraggled
unspeakable arcs
he's conjured with his shillings,

each child strong enough
to manage it
carries a child.
(Morrissey, 2020, 124.)

12 Though written out of rich contrasts and contradictions – impelled into existence by them, even – poems do not get written to resolve paradoxes. I didn't intend to 'solve' the 'problem' of Hogg's 1912 demolition sequence in this poem, any more than I had a single opinion about it. Instead my aim was to illuminate the complexity of the subject matter – Hogg looking at a working-class child; me looking at Hogg looking at a working-class child – to scrub it up like a brass rubbing, and let it stand.

3. The 'Truth' of Photographs?

13 When my son was five years old, coincidentally around the same time I was writing *Parallax*, he asked me a question. *Is it true, Mummy that in the olden days everything happened in black and white?* Because of the invention of the black-and-white photograph, because of the advent of black-and-white film, I think we do believe, on some deep subliminal level, that this is the case. It remains hard for me to imagine the First World War, for example, in colour.

14 A Victorian photograph of Newcastle Cloth Market was discovered only recently, in 2012, among a box of discarded glass-plate negatives in the city's Miners' Institute. (The Guardian newspaper. Eyewitness: Newcastle Upon Tyne. Friday 30th March, 2012. Accessed via: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/picture/2012/mar/30/eyewitness-newcastle-upon-tyne>). In this scene salvaged from History, in which everyone in the frame is certainly dead, we encounter a wonderfully charismatic woman, posed as though for an impressionist painting, hand on one hip, a book open on her lap, boldly confronting the camera instead of keeping an eye on her clothing stall. Given the year this

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photograph was taken (1886), everything on view is naturally in black and white.

15 Draining the world of colour – even if not intentional and a mere consequence of the limitations of early photographic technology – remains an act of drastic falsification. "The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there," wrote L. P. Hartley in his 1953 novel *The Go-Between*. Marvellous as this woman is inside her sepia universe, because she is operating in a radically different palette, we unconsciously assume that she is not – that she cannot be – the same as us.

16 My poem 'A Lie' explores the radical falsification of the world at the heart of early photography just as photography was being heralded as more accurate than anything that had preceded it. By writing 'A Lie', I wanted to undermine the notion that people in the past are unreachable.

A Lie
That their days were not like our days,
the different people who lived in sepia –

more buttoned, colder, with slower wheels,
shut off, sunk back, in the unwakeable house

for all we call and knock.
And even the man with the box and the flaming torch

who made his servants stand so still
their faces itched can't offer us what it cost

to watch the foreyard being lost
to cream and shadow, the pierced sky

placed in a frame. Irises under the window sill
were the colour of Ancient Rome.
(Morrissey. 2020: 154)

17 Here I imagine the transaction between photographer and photographed as immortality, but at a price. And that the price – the loss of colour – isn't worth it.

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4. Now You See It. Now You Don't

18 Raised in a Communist family in Belfast during the Troubles, I have an abiding fascination with the USSR. Through my thirties, over a decade after the Fall of the Berlin Wall, as a consequence of reading histories critical of the Soviet Project such as Orlando Figes' A *People's Tragedy*, *The Russian Revolution* 1891-1924, I found myself coming to painful terms with the manifold atrocities of the Soviet regime. A friend lent me a book about photography in the Soviet Union under Stalin called *The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin's Russia* by David King.

19 In *The Commissar Vanishes* I learned how, at a time when doctoring photographs was not an easy thing to achieve, Stalin established a secret Ministry in Moscow to do exactly this. As people fell out of favour with his regime and were dispatched, to the Gulag, or to the execution squads, or both (which they did in exponential numbers as the 1930s progressed), Stalin was desperate to ensure they would simultaneously be erased from the photographic record itself.

20 The socially progressive impetus which may (or may not) have informed Hogg's photographs of Belfast's working poor, is inverted completely in the photographs reproduced inside the pages of *The Commissar Vanishes*. In this dystopian new world, the photograph is not truer than painting but rather a lie of the grossest possible dimensions. It upends Barthes' declarative statement, *this thing has been there*, by taking the thing that has been there and making it disappear. People who were in a room in real life, whom the camera has dutifully captured, are uncannily magicked away, just as untold millions were magicked away during the Terror. Here the photograph is not a record of a singular moment plucked and salvaged from the time continuum. Instead, the photograph is contingent on changing whim and circumstance. It keeps step with lethal political whimsy. It is never finished.

21 In my poem 'The Doctors', I describe photography as a language, and the doctoring of photographs in the USSR under Stalin as a foreign language, violently imposed, which must be mastered if you are to stand any chance of survival under the new regime.

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The Doctors
In this country
they are desecrating photographs –
those that tell the truth of their own flown moment
simply as it was, that are naïve as schoolchildren
set down in a bewildering classroom and bid to speak
their name and place of birth in a foreign tongue,
who revert, instinctively, to their own, as slates
and straps and canes rain down upon them.

It is the camera's
inherent generosity of outlook
which is more often than not at fault:
the one-whose-name-we-dare-not-whisper
sitting at breakfast with Our Great Leader
on holiday in the Urals, or idly grinding his teeth
in a dim committee room, his glasses like miniature
headlights reflecting the flash.

With scissors,
nail files, ink and Sellotape, he has been vanished –
alongside other party operatives who touched
His sleeve, or didn't clap for long enough, or loved
their wives, or laughed, or who pointed the way
down some rickety steps as though He needed help –
whole Politburos cropped to a man, or at most
a handful of survivors ranged around a chess table,

scratched absences
over their shoulders made luminous as moons.
It is addictive: the urge to utter a language
both singular and clean. It is progressive –
how the power to transform a conspirator into a pillar
transmutes, in turn, to the eradication
of the accidental as a class of photograph:
how litter, bleak weather, a sneer,

or too many smiling
parents who later disappeared are also doctored.

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And should anyone be missed – turning up
in textbooks before the grave extent
of their transgression's been established –
a nation's boys and girls, all trained
in proper parlance, their fingers stained with soot,
draw over women's faces black balloons.
(Morrissey. 2020: 147)

22 In this final image of children denouncing their elders, and in my through-metaphor of photography as a language, there are clear links to George Orwell's 1984. The equivalent of the doctored photograph is Newspeak – a controlled language of simplified grammar and limited vocabulary, redolent with gaps and absences, and with the forcibly excised.

5. Colour too Soon? The Past as Dressing Up

23 If black and white photography falsifies the world, and if photographs themselves can be manipulated after-the-fact, how 'true' is the un-manipulated colour photograph? Here I'd like to turn to the archive of a pioneering Russian photographer working at exactly the same time as Alexander Hogg half a planet away in St Peterburg.

24 Sergei Prokúdin-Gorsky was born into an aristocratic Russian family in 1863. He started out as a chemist, experimenting with triplicate lantern slides, and quickly became famous for his innovative colour photography technique. After capturing Leo Tolstoy in a casual blue shirt and black boots sitting in a brown wicker chair at the gates of his estate in 1808, Prokúdin-Gorsky became an overnight sensation. Demanding his own colour portrait, Tsar Nicholas II was so delighted with the result he instantly gifted Prokúdin-Gorsky a steam train (with one of the carriages converted to a dark room) and dispatched him to photograph the peoples of the Russian Empire on a journey that would take over six years.

25 In addition to occupying roughly the same time frame in history, both Hogg and Prokúdin-Gorsky were nationally famous within their own countries. Both were photographic entrepreneurs, setting themselves up and running successful businesses. Both landed lucrative public

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roles, even if, as Tsar Nicholas II's official photographer, Prokúdin-Gorsky moved in rather more elevated national circles than Hogg. Both were commissioned to document, archive and collect photographic representations of their respective State's subjects. But the simple yet fundamental difference which divides them – that Hogg took black-and-white photographs, while Prokúdin-Gorsky took photographs in colour – drastically separates their work.

26 Now housed in the Library of Congress in Washington and carefully digitised, you can access the entire Prokudin-Gorsky photographic archive here: <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/prok/>. He photographed everyone he came across: farmers and women, children and patriarchs, sailors and respectable minor gentry; people of different ethnicities; rural agrarian workers and townspeople. He photographed villagers arranged in their traditional clothes, under blindingly blue, mid-continent skies. He photographed the white-washed belfries and golden domes of Orthodox monasteries. And the photographs he took on his long odyssey around the Russian Empire are so startling because they are so colourful – so *counterintuitively* colourful. Colour was both his method and his most provocative calling-card, and that he achieved all this in the years preceding the Bolshevik Revolution is one of his work's most surprising aspects.

27 During my childhood, I absorbed a narrative of the Russian Revolution which framed the coup d'état by the Bolsheviks in October 1917 as essentially modernising – as a movement designed to haul the enormous, sprawling, backward, feudal Tsarist empire kicking and screaming into the twentieth century. Familiar with the *agitprop* posters of the era, predominantly designed in vibrant blues, yellows and of course reds, I absorbed the nonsensical notion that, just as the Beatles had brought colour to Britain in 1963 (a nonsensical notion all its own), the Russian Revolution had brought colour to Russia in 1917. The *agitprop* posters proved it, while the *agit-trains* brought the posters that proved it to the far-flung peoples of the old-Russian-Empire in the middle of the euphoric, bloody, traumatic process of morphing into the Soviet Union.

28 Though it didn't follow the French example, and actually change the names of the years, I still believed the Russian Revolution had been so earth-shattering it had effectively severed time, in order to start it all

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over again, with the consequence that everything black-and-white fell on one side of 1917, and everything brightly coloured on the other. On the old side of 1917, so my skewed logic ran: agricultural serfdom and tyrannous priests. On the new side of 1917: the poetry of Vladimir Mayakovsky and hydroelectric dams, for in the words of Lenin himself, hadn't Communism equalled *Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country*?

29 Prokudin-Gorsky's photographs upended all such lazy assumptions. For here were Shtetl girls in their maroon and lavender headscarves and vermillion aprons standing outside a barn door in 1913 looking like girls I knew, like a girl I could have been myself even, rather than girls from the dim, pre-revolutionary, monotone past. Far from being backward, uniform, mired in mud, Tsarist Russia, it seemed, had been gaudy and bright after all. Just as the photograph of Jérôme had done for Barthes, these images not only upset my understanding of history, they brought history vertiginously close. And I knew I had to write about these photographs, too, if only to explore the paradoxical sense that Prokúdin-Gorsky's Russian subjects weren't really from 1913 at all, but were rather imposters, people like me, from today, dressing up. I couldn't escape the notion that the colour in these photographs of Tsarist Russia effectively time-stamped them an elaborate forgery. In *On Balance*, the collection after *Parallax* in which my poem about the Prokúdin-Gorsky archive first appeared, my final poem about photography and time (for I had reached the end of a rich creative seam) is laid out in landscape rather than portrait mode. This way, as well as reading a poem, the reader is simultaneously scanning an image. 'Colour Photographs of Tsarist Russia', suitably for a poem in the ekphrastic mode, is typographically skewed towards the visual.

Colour Photographs of Tsarist Russia
Because of so much colour – purples greens and blues, yellow, copper reds –
where we least expect it, Prokudin-Gorsky's outpost villagers seem more like us
dressed up than like themselves, posing in a past bequeathed to them in snatches
rather than interrupted from the task at hand. The girls look mismatched,

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overfitted, stuffed into what was left after the travelling theatre's costume box
got ransacked. Old at seven, elbows out and serious as tax inspectors,
in layered skirts so beetroot they could have been soaked in soup,
these three proffer china plates of forest berries in variegated shades –
iris, magenta, plum – which ricochet in turn as a kind of rhyme
off floral handkerchiefs, pleated aprons, blouses, buttons, cuffs
dipped in dyes we haven't seen the like of. They can't be comfortable –
or are they merely wilful, staying put on the wrong side of the century,
refusing to wear trousers? The cerise shirt on the back of the man
in the open-shaft iron mine, resting on his shovel, the barge haulers,
woodcutters and troops of riverboatmen in vests the colour of duck eggs
turn 'Volga Work Parties, 1905' into a room next door we might briefly visit
where nothing would surprise us. Want to see my boots? asks a foreman,
tipping up one foot at a cocky angle. The headscarf on his wife ignites a meadow.
And if, because they're richer, living in a town, or in thrall to Queen Victoria
and her calamitous black, some people have fought back their spectral natures,
choosing instead to appear to us both looped-at-the-waist and dark, the buildings
behind them haven't: whole streets rise seashell pink or powder blue
out of the middle picture, ringing the radical bells of themselves for miles around.
Over *Golódnaya Stiep*, or Starving Steppe, the weather co-operates also:
this sky exactly half of what's been taken two shades brighter than lazuli
with no rain cloud in sight is as good as God's promise to Ishmael
for the women scything a hayfield underneath it. Tashkent. Archangel. Samarkand.

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Here's he's stopped for a moment en route (these days his perpetual state)
for a rare self-portrait: hatted, moustachioed, bespectacled, thin,
Chief Photographer to the Tsar. You can tell he's already distracted
by the thought of his railway-car-darkroom, a gift from Nicholas himself,
where the three magic filters for his new magic lantern will approximate what was there.
This particular Babushka on this particular veranda on this particular evening
in this particular summer is spinning a skein of wool. Tomorrow night is bath night.
In the morning, she'll step out of the clothes she owns, including her footcloths,
and into her second shift, boil a copper of water, slosh and sluice them clean
with a stick of birch, then hang them out to dry all day, like the flags
of a continent's countries strung across her garden, so that afterwards,
her hair de-gritted and every pore alive, not a single unwashed item touches her skin.
(Morrissey. 2020: 216-217)

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English

‘Photographing Time’ traces the influence of two coterminous early photographers, Alexander Robert Hogg of Belfast, Ireland (1870-1939) and Sergei Prokúdin-Gorsky of St Petersburg, Russia (1863-1944) on my own practice as a poet. I have written extensively about early photography, particularly (though not exclusively) in my collection *Parallax* (2012): a work whose very title is a photographic term, and which functions as an extended meditation on mortality, socio-economic inequality, the aesthetics and ethics of framing, and the knowability – or otherwise – of historical fact.

Français

« Photographing Time » retrace l'influence de deux photographes des années 1920-1930, Alexander Robert Hogg de Belfast, Irlande (1870-1939) et Sergei Prokúdin-Gorsky de Saint-Pétersbourg, Russie (1863-1944) sur ma propre pratique en tant que poète. J'ai beaucoup écrit sur les débuts de la photographie, en particulier (mais pas exclusivement) dans mon recueil *Parallax* (2012). Cet ouvrage, dont le titre même est un terme photographique, constitue une longue méditation sur la mortalité, les inégalités socio-économiques, l'esthétique et l'éthique du cadrage, ainsi que sur la possibilité de connaître - ou non - les faits historiques.

Mots-clés

photographie, Hogg (Alexander Robert), Prokudin-Gorsky (Sergei), parallaxe, poésie, ekphrasis

Keywords

photography, Hogg (Alexander Robert), Prokudin-Gorsky (Sergei), parallax, poetry, ekphrasis

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