

Visual literacy through Bartleby's syndrome

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Abstract

Analysis of Bartleby, a character by Herman Melville (*Bartleby, The Scrivener*, 1853), in relation to his obstinacy ('I would prefer not to'), demands reflection on the condition of the photographic image (Gilles Deleuze, 'Bartleby, ou la formule', 1989; Giorgio Agamben, 'Bartleby o della contingenza', 1993) and understanding of the relevance that contemporary theory has given to the act of vernacular photography (Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not*, 2004).

This article looks at the interpretation of Bartleby syndrome (Enrique Vila-Matas, *Bartleby y compañía*, 2000) to represent and obtain visual literacy in the field of photography. The possibility of taking a photograph of this literary character comes close to that of the taking of failed photographs. Like Bartleby, the subject of a failed photograph (unfocussed, un-centred, amongst other errors) does not correspond to common social and individual expectations: they neither conform to a perfect image, nor to socially-widespread models relating to the idealization of familiar roles.

The historical paradigm of photography supported within Brunelleschi's *Perspectiva Artificialis* and models used in the history of art (Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography*, 1937), excluded photography for private and everyday use. Our article will show how current historic-cultural reflections on photography treat the vernacular photographic object (anonymous photographs, snapshots, family albums), neglected throughout the historic-cultural construction of the photographic medium (Douglas R. Nickel, *Snapshots*, 1998; Michel Frizot and Cédric de Veigy, *Photo Trouvée*, 2006).

Bartleby is today a paradox: socially understood, given new commonly-held expectations, it is extinguished by the very process involved in becoming more widely-known. Vernacular photography, now included in the academic discourse as part of the visual canon, brings demands relating to visual literacy that go far beyond the popularity of the medium itself.

Key Words: Bartleby, vernacular photography, unsuccessful photography, visual literacy, obstinacy, contingency, rereading.

1. Bartleby and the non-response

Nineteenth-century literature provides us with a character that is an excellent metaphor of the discrepancies between requests placed before the photographic

medium – both for the recent historical and critical production on photography,¹ and for a common interest in family photography – and this character's inability to at least partially respond. That's Bartleby. This character will be our protagonist, whose *non-response* summarizes the possibility of a clarification that makes sense with regard to the photographic medium's specific link to a participation movement in the city which is also intrinsic to a modern perception.²

The short story entitled *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street*,³ written in 1853 by Herman Melville, takes place around the impossibility of a conclusion. As the narrator will point out at the end of the narrative, if everything or almost everything was left unsaid regarding Bartleby, one of the effects of the short story is, precisely, to arouse the reader's curiosity concerning that which will forever remain unrevealed. The question that will remain unanswered pertains to justifying the protagonist's strange behavior. The narrator informs us that what we will find out about this peculiar employee was witnessed with his own astonished eyes, while assuring us that the sense of vision is predominant in a story that appears to move away from the written word and tend toward the image.

But I waive the biographies of all other scriveners for a few passages in the life of Bartleby, who was a scrivener, the strangest I ever saw or heard of. [...] Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from the original sources, and, in his case, those are very small. What my own astonished eyes saw of Bartleby, *that* is all I know of him, except, indeed, one vague report, which will appear in the sequel.⁴

This law-copyist, who refuses to check the copy, ends up no longer copying, remains in the office even after having been fired, and he is arrested without resistance and, in an indifferent tone, repeats the phrase, 'I would prefer not to,' like a constant line of conduct. Ironically, what's involved is knowing whether this preference actually corresponds a firm decision not to respond, or if this is a mechanically repeated formulation because there is no position, as no choice is being made and a formula is being repeated. According to Gilles Deleuze, Bartleby's formula is agrammatical, as it sounds like an anomaly of the version 'I had rather not,' thus becoming a limit construction that exhausts language itself. Bartleby does not refuse or state anything when not identifying the object of his preference (for instance, keeping on copying), as he simply shows an impossibility that does not distinguish between non-preferred activities and a preferable one. This are of indetermination allows Bartleby to remain motionless without saying yes or no, thus placing him in a *suspended* state that is incompatible with the social conventions of office and jail.⁵ However, the way this clerk manipulates both the narrator and the reader – with the former shouldering responsibility for this poor

creature – is not the result of a scheming premeditation or the result of social rebellion, as it is precisely a condition that defines Bartleby as an excluded individual, thus keenly disarming and wounding both.

In the early 1850's, the new modern society asserted progress at the expense of the past, the development of scientific and technical knowledge hinged on machine work, whose aim rested on maximum production and output. This violent transformation of the metropolis gave rise to a profound shift in values, interests and duties. The subject found to be in a space that was unproductive, misanthropic, unclassifiable or marginal would place himself in an unenviable threshold relative to the bourgeois capitalist system. In his introduction to the anthology *Classic Essays on Photography*, from 1980, Alan Trachtenberg refers to the technical and cultural modernity linked to photography from the first historical and critical texts on this means of depiction.

Expanding cities and the incessant application of machinery to the productions of goods are perhaps the most important historical events that impinge upon the earlier discussions of photography, for the medium represented to its earliest commentators both science and communication: a decidedly *modern* device, a sign and prophecy of changing times. In photography the earliest writers saw a testimony to the genuine radicalness of an age of railroads, the telegraph, and mass production – an age of wondrous science and technology.⁶

Bartleby, as an abandoned creature, corresponds to the *alienated one*, since he is a victim of the social and economic transformations experienced by the subject – transformations also expressed by the photographer wandering around town in search of a unique picture – and, to a large extent, according to a new urban experience and participation. However, that which is modern ambiguously experienced this need to break away and preserve tradition, as it swayed between pragmatic rationality and excitement, which also led it to a social distancing due to the quest for a uniqueness that was increasingly difficult to attain. ‘Bartleby’s syndrome’⁷ originated in the latter half of the 19th century, the inadaptability or reversal modern apologia with regard to productive, communicative and institutional infallibility, in accordance with a new social rhythm and lifestyle. Just as Bartleby corresponded to the physical space he took up in the office, modernity brought about the emergence of *bartlebys*, while rejecting individuals who placed themselves in the interstices of the social system itself, or in a neighbouring space relative to the publicly established norm.

Following the inevitable death of the clerk, the narrator points to a certain rumor that could justify this illness of the soul experienced by the employee: he raises the possibility that this misfortune-prone man worked as a subordinate in the

Dead Letter Office at Washington,⁸ whose task was to burn lost letters that had never arrived at their destination; there could be countless such letters annually. Those messages of life, those letters that would hasten toward death, would resemble Bartleby at the moment when the narrator abandoned the mission of welcoming him, as the narrator no longer recognized him as *a letter which had always been addressed to him*. Thus, this abandoned account doomed to oblivion would no longer be repeated and remembered, as it survives only if in the present, if welcomed at the present moment of which it is a part.

2. *Bartleby and Photography's noeme*

Bartleby's non-response, the insistent 'I would prefer not to', is the depiction of a character whose illness of the soul converges on the inevitability found by Roland Barthes in *Photography's noeme*.⁹ The person being referred to is doomed to death and oblivion, but as an image, the object or subject captured only remains silent if we are unable to forge a relevant dialogue.

Whereas Bartleby represents the impossibility of communication, the figure of stubbornness par excellence or of the fixed and unchanging response, it is precisely in the *reproducibility of discourse and in the inevitability of death that this syndrome converges on analogue Photography*. As an actual, tangible object, the photograph remains fixed and unchangeable. The subject's participation and responsibility are needed, by assuming that this image has always been intended for him/her. The photograph shows an analogy with that which is real; in spite of this, that doesn't mean it can't arouse other words or postpone answers to questions being asked. Bartleby embodies a veiled request, a prayer for redemption only foreseen by a keen eye which glimpses this *particular aspect* with a need for protection. Coming up with the possibility of a photographic depiction for Bartleby's syndrome would be unfeasible if, as *hunters*, we assume the journey and the uproar over the quest. This character will be incompatible with any prepared, affectionless observation. At this stage, we regard an interpretation of home and family photography as visual text or visual literacy, so as to include a possible horizon of communication expectations. Hardware is our reading not previously constructed, even before having access to the photographs, to these texts? Isn't the observer responsible for coming up with the inherent question to the depiction and with regard to which its interpretation will amount to a possible answer? All that's left for us to do is raise a few possibilities for reflection regarding this convergence between a photographic portrait and Bartleby's non-response.

3. *Bartleby's response and the failed photograph*

The *Forget Me Not: Photography & Remembrance* exhibit was curated by Geoffrey Batchen and presented in 2004 at the Van Gogh Museum, in Amsterdam. The photographic objects on display – daguerreotypes, albumen prints, painted and

framed tintypes, or snapshot albums – showed a contemporary interest in the various uses of photographic depiction in the private sphere. Through daily vernacular photography, often by anonymous photographers and according to a technique, home-based production and mixed taste, the exhibit highlighted uses and procedures normally excluded from an academic and canonical discourse asserted by the History of Photography.¹⁰



Image 1 and Image 2 – Bartlebys.

Photographer and date unknown. From the private collection of Maria João Baltazar.

Ordinary photographs taken in daily contexts are on sale at certain used bookstores. While there are records with a central framework, focused characters, good lighting and contrast, there are also records with people out of focus, cut off or off-center, eyes accidentally closed, among other misfortunes. The batch becomes a mixed set of private photographs with or without errors, but, in any event, excluded from the family milieu. These portraits may be redeemed by someone who will assume responsibility for such damaged images that are headed for oblivion. Thus being the case, *we take these photographic records left out by the failure as a specific depiction of Bartleby's syndrome*: portraits on the threshold of exposure and recognition, characters who were not visible when such photographs were taken, as they existed solely within the realm of photographic proof.

Any photographer who has taken daily domestic portraits has already been faced with messed-up photographs, evidence of errors that took place when such photographs were taken, due to either human or technical error. Such errors give rise to new and unrecognizable creatures whose limit of visibility will be a blank film. We are interested in reflecting on messed-up private portraits, turned into

disturbing images of unknowns. Perhaps we will come up with a possibility of understanding Bartleby in messed-up portrait photography.

As for family portraits and ordinary expectations – sharpness of the individual being portrayed, proper centring, suitable exposure, contrast and focus, among various conventions that follow an apology of visibility – the subject is actually allowed to be replaced with a depiction. However, if such conformity does not occur, we may perceive a new universe of norms, now reversed relative to the aforementioned conventions. We would be moving within a *negative context*, where the photographic image would move away from that which is real and head toward a neighboring space between the reference and portrayal, a threshold where a possible mediation between what is visible and what is invisible would occur.

Photographing Bartleby means portraying a non-response in image form, or the impossibility of the message's survival without the reader's care and protection. Still, asking Bartleby to pose for a portrait would be a request without consent. In any context, the same formula will be repeated and so, despite Bartleby's statement of 'I would prefer not to', we will need greater convergence. If there is a possibility for depiction, it will be through a non-premeditated photograph which, strangely enough, takes substance in a misfortune, in a non-calculated error, far from the methodical intentionality setting the flaw.

4. Bartleby and Visual Literacy

In this text, we have mentioned the academic tradition that defined the construction of a History of Photography from science and Art History, as set forth by Brunelleschi, Beaumont Newhall, and Helmut and Alison Gernsheim. We see the evidence of the partiality that led a certain photographic academic discourse to exclude the objects and daily uses of the photographic medium.

The recent historical and critical production of photography has shown particular care for the vernacular photographic object and the most popular uses of the photographic portrait – Geoffrey Batchen, Michel Frizot and Cédric de Veigy – that is, the amateur production that had been left out of the canonical historical discourse. However, at the moment when *private daily-use objects are taken from their original context and placed in the museum's display window*, we must not forget the imposition of receiving and reading codes formulated by the museum institution, as well as by the public. Private lives from times gone by appear to be welcomed and tolerated, solely for what they show as being different from the norm, hence, for what they contain as being *naïf*, picturesque or caricature-like. If Bartleby converges on Photography's *noeme* by Barthes – by always repeating the same non-response in keeping with a mechanical logic analogous to the photographic portrait itself – he also announces his own death, by causing his formula 'I would prefer not to' to converge on the *noeme*'s 'That-has-been'. Still, of vernacular photography has been absorbed by academic and museum-related discourse, thereby disseminating daily photographic production, so, too, Bartleby

is found to be socially more integrated. Today, Bartleby's depression becomes a common place and, at that moment, we see the cancellation of his very existence as being the possibility of a visual literacy through this character.

Notes

- ¹ Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not: Photography & Remembrance* (New York: Princeton Architectural, 2004); Michel Frizot and Cédric de Veigy, *Photo Trouvée* (New York: Phaidon, 2006); Geoffrey Batchen, Yoshiaki Kai and Masashi Kohara, *Suspending Time: Life – Photography – Death* (Japan: Nohara, 2010).
- ² We regard the cognitive and sensitive ambivalence proposed by Baudelaire in *The Painter of Modern Life*, as a modern perception experienced by the photographer in the city of the latter half of the 19th century. Charles Baudelaire, ‘The Painter of Modern Life (1863)’, in *The Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Przyblyski (New York: Routledge, 2004), 37-42.
- ³ *Bartleby, the Scrivener* was first published anonymously and in two parts in *Putnam’s Magazine*, in the November and December 1853 issues, and later published in 1856, with slight changes, in Melville’s collection *The Piazza Tales*.
- ⁴ Herman Melville, *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street* (New York: Melville House, 2010), 3-4.
- ⁵ Gilles Deleuze, ‘Bartleby; or, The Formula’, in *Essays Critical and Clinical* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 68-90.
- ⁶ Alan Trachtenberg, ed., Introduction to *Classic Essays on Photography*, by Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, Conn.: Leete’s Island Books, 1980), ix.
- ⁷ Enrique Vila-Matas develops the topic of renouncing writing from Bartleby’s syndrome in *Bartleby & Co.*, from the year 2000. Vila-Matas refers to Melville’s depressions as being the author’s *dark hours*. Enrique Vila-Matas, *Bartleby & Co.* (London: Vintage Books, 2005), 98-109.
- ⁸ Melville, *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, 64.
- ⁹ Barthes identifies the name of Photography’s *noeme* as being ‘That-has-been’. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage Books, 2000), 76-77.
- ¹⁰ An academic discourse of the history of photography hinged on founding works that established a usual and (later on) assumed chronology based on methods such as the Brunelleschi’s *perspectiva artificialis* or Fine Arts models. Private and domestic uses of the photographic object were left out when the History of Photography was being put together. The works of Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present*, and Gernsheim and Alison Gernsheim, *The History of Photography: From de Earliest Use of the Camera Obscura in the Eleventh Century up to 1914*, became historical references.

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