



Ethics and politics of the instant: a tribute to Maurício Lissovsky

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Maurício Lissovsky*



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Abstract: In 2010, Maurício Lissovsky taught a graduate course called “The redemption method.” Based on notes and readings of this course, this article inquires about the possibility of thinking about ethics and politics of the “instant” – a term frequently used in classes to refer to the messianic apprehension of a singular temporality: the now saturated with tensions. To bring the problem to light, the method of individuation of the philosophical element (*Entwicklungsfähigkeit*) was used on the discursive set that made up the course above. This study is concluded with the questioning about the value of Lissovsky’s propositions in light of the requirement for ethics and politics in current times.

Keywords: redemption; photography; biopolitics; history.

Resumo: Em 2010, Maurício Lissovsky ministrou um curso de Pós-Graduação denominado “O método da redenção”. A partir de anotações e leituras sugeridas nesse curso, questiona-se a possibilidade de pensar uma ética e uma política do “instante” – termo frequentemente utilizado nas aulas para se referir à apreensão messiânica de uma temporalidade singular: o agora saturado de tensões. Para se chegar ao problema, utilizou-se o método da individuação do elemento filosófico (*Entwicklungsfähigkeit*) sobre o conjunto discursivo que compôs o referido curso. Conclui-se com o questionamento acerca do valor da proposição de Lissovsky frente à exigência de uma ética e uma política para os tempos atuais.

Palavras-chave: redenção; fotografia; biopolítica; história.

Introduction

[...] every image of the past that addresses the present is irretrievable without the present feeling it addresses.

Walter Benjamin

Challenged by the question that opens this dossier—“How do images see our present time?”—I was transported back 14 years, when, as a PhD student, I participated in a course taught by Professor Maurício Lissovsky at the School of Communication at the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro. Along with the friendship formed there, I recalled some of Lissovsky’s mysterious interventions and a few texts that, perhaps due to a certain immaturity I’ve partly outgrown over time, now seem less enigmatic.

The title of that course—The Method of Redemption—recently resurfaced in my reflections, carrying a Benjaminian aura: a reunion, a correspondence of gazes in a fleeting moment. When revisiting the course syllabus, I came across a text that had caused me great perplexity at the time. “*Signo: tigre. Ascendente: lontra. História, fotografia e adivinhação em Walter Benjamin*,” published in 1998 by the magazine “O Percevejo”². I recall the text as a catastrophe, as it shook the scientific mindset I was deeply immersed in at that moment.

Even in the title of the text, with its ironic and provocative tone, there’s a suggestion of a certain degree of magic or mysticism to be explored in its folds and depths. It is no surprise that key ideas were not grasped at the time, as my focus (and, I believe, that of many others present) was on acquiring concepts, a theoretical model, a method—this bastion of science—capable of refining its analytical arsenals. Now, I can better understand the intent of its creator: to make the otter’s whistle echo through its enigmas, as a device that captures its audience only in the future.

In this following essay, I attempt to recover some forgotten images, silenced voices, and questions that were previously unraised, because only now, in this moment of danger, do they flash like lightning. Although Lissovsky’s writings may point to a thematic field bound to history and aesthetics, I argue that they are inherently tied to politics and ethics. Reflecting about history is already presupposing a notion of time and a legitimate (or hegemonic) way of experiencing it—one that can both subsume past events and lives, annihilate material and spiritual elements, and block or redirect the advent of transformation. Likewise, it is impossible to discuss photography without reflecting on the role of technique (or technology) in shaping humanity’s

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stance toward nature: Is it the exploitation of material compositions or the awakening of its dormant creatures? The extraction of available resources or the unleashing of their potentialities? (Lissovsky, 1995).

Benjamin's (1987) critique of progress (read: technology), which was mistakenly embraced by much of early 20th-century German social democracy, is perhaps the most notable example of how an unreflective conception of history could lead to the most catastrophic human calamity of the time.

Bridging a gaze cast over 10 years ago, so that it is not lost forever, or attempting a tiger's leap into the 'now' of this writing, is what the following lines aim to accomplish.

The Method of Redemption

On March 9, 2010, Lissovsky introduced the new graduate students of that year to a course with an unusual title: "*O método da redenção: a estética como crítica da cultura.*" For students like myself, who were not yet familiar with the key concepts of that which would become the main reference of the course, the syllabus left no room for questioning: "This course concludes the cycle dedicated to Walter Benjamin and his contemporary readers in the fields of aesthetics and art history, particularly Giorgio Agamben and Georges Didi-Huberman."³

There was a total of 15 sessions, extending until June of that year, covering numerous influential intellectuals of art, history, and photography. Despite the conceptual and theoretical diversity of the authors that were discussed, the focus of the course was on the method being presented, as conceived by Lissovsky himself: "to recognize and experiment with the iconographic and analytical-critical procedures that emerge from this theoretical space where image and history coincide."

I was surprised by Benjamin's proposed readings, as my technical background had exposed me only to the famous essay "The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility" (1936/1987). There, the issue of the devaluation of art with the advent of reproduction—a theme so characteristic of the so-called Frankfurt School, which, through an inadequate association, had cast Benjamin as yet another apocalyptic of mass culture—gave way to singular problems and reflections, such as the origin of language, the mystery of resemblance, Jewish epistemology (if we may call it like that), and, above all, the possibility of photography serving as the guardian of an alternative concept of history.

³ The course is listed in the syllabi for the "Advanced Seminar in Communication I" (Seminário Avançado em Comunicação I).

The concept of redemption was grounded in this Benjaminian conjecture, specifically in the ability of both the artist (in this case, the learned photographer) and his interlocutor (here, the viewer, the translator, the diviner, but also the communication scholar) to recognize in the artwork an opening in the empty and homogeneous time (typical of historicism, vulgar Marxism, progress) for a moment laden with tensions. The method derived from this consisted of finding the appropriate means to redeem that event, meaning to enter that moment in order to somehow describe its configuration: “[...] the lifework is both preserved and sublated *in* the work, the era *in* the lifework, and the entire course” (Benjamin, 2006, p. 396).

In this method, the idea of the monad as a structure of the moment made the photographic record one of the possible means of capture, where image and history may coincide, as Lissovsky reiterates. Along this messianic task, learned photographers and unconventional historians (those of the “petty history”) were elevated to the status of revealers of humankind’s blessedness on this earth.

As the course progressed, participants grew excited about the possibility of applying the method to their respective empirical objects: image collections, films, archives of governments and republican states, etc. I believe this enthusiasm can be attributed to the discovery of a theoretical framework capable of providing a unique aesthetic understanding or, perhaps, to the mystical nature that, at times, evoked a spiritual component within the secular activity of science. This was, in fact, the most intriguing factor, and the reason I returned to the course texts to rediscover their author.

A Politics (and Ethics) of the Moment

In a random search for my current research project—biopower and communication—I came across a text by Benjamin: “Capitalism as Religion.” As the title suggests, the author associates a spiritual vector to the development of an ostensibly secular activity, taking as his starting point the German word *Schuld*, which means both obligation and guilt.

My investigation had already identified this connection in Michel Foucault’s study on biopower, the theoretical mechanism that locates, in modernity, the systematic use of the discipline of the bodies (anatomopolitics) as a technology of the State (biopolitics). As is well known, it was the Christian monasteries of the 12th century that, according to Foucault, served as the epicenter from which this technology spread across Europe, creating the conditions—we could say spiritual—for the expansion of this economic system. Thus, from a heterogeneous and dispersed mass of God-fearing

believers, discipline gave rise to the worker (the laborer in the city, the peasant in the countryside), a social form whose energy (political, spiritual) was entirely channeled into labor and, from there, into industrial production.

Prior to that, Max Weber had already ventured a similar hypothesis and developed an important analysis of this transformation in his study of Protestantism. As I read Benjamin's text, I realized that his critiques of capitalism did not confine themselves to the commodification of artistic objects (and value) or to the ideological diffusion that reduced aesthetic experience to mass culture products. It was a critique both deeper and broader, as it penetrated—much like Foucault—into the microphysical level of capitalism, the motivational force that drives each cogwheel, while also pointing to the historical and contextual elements that nourished it.

Indeed, what is the fate of the indebted serf but that of endless labor to atone for guilt? The promise of forgiveness, continually deferred as it draws nearer, is the foundation of progress, a teleology heavily criticized by Benjamin. And all the better if this labor can be aided by technology, in a regime of individual salvation that, according to Benjamin, leads to fascism: "The themes which monastic discipline assigned to friars for meditation were designed to turn them away from the world and its affairs. The thoughts we are developing here have a similar aim" (Benjamin, 2006, p. 393).

The heralds of this ethical-political organization, until then barely perceptible—fascism—were both labor and technology. Somehow, according to Benjamin, fascism was announced by the conjunction of labor and technical (or instrumental) rationality, a union that purged labor of everything but the appropriation of nature.

It was as if capitalism itself were not the cause but the effect of a "stubborn faith in progress" (Benjamin, 2006, p. 393), and the institutions that built it, when not being dragged behind it, drifted aimlessly.

This vulgar-Marxism conception of the nature of labor scarcely considers the question of how its products could ever benefit the workers when they are beyond the means of those workers. It recognizes only the progress made in mastering nature, not the regression of society; it already displays the technocratic features that later emerge in fascism (Benjamin, 2006, p. 393).

Redeeming a moment within the frenetic and uncontrollable flow of "mechanical time" (Löwy, 2013, p. 18) was not only an act of slowing its overwhelming momentum but also of suggesting, through another doctrine, a way of life, an *ethos*.

Before moving forward, it is relevant to clarify that Benjamin's reading here is not carried out through a direct engagement with Lissovsky's interpretations from the aforementioned course. The former is an invaluable reference for the latter who, in my opinion, skillfully applied his magic and philosophy to his empirical objects—image and photography. If I were to find a word to encapsulate the way I appropriate these two authors in formulating a problem—the ethical-political dimension of the moment—I would venture the term *Entwicklungsfähigkeit*. It appears in a text by Giorgio Agamben⁴ to illustrate an unusual exegesis, namely: to deepen an underlying concept or theory, one abandons the more immediate or direct correlations of a text or author.

One of the methodological principles I constantly follow in my research is to identify within the texts and contexts I work with what Feuerbach defined as the philosophical element, that is, the point of their *Entwicklungsfähigkeit* (literally, capacity for development), the *locus* and the moment at which such texts are capable of development. However, when we interpret and develop this meaning within an author's text, there comes a point where we realize we can no longer continue without violating the most basic rules of hermeneutics. This means that the development of the text in question has reached a point of indecision where it becomes impossible to distinguish between the author and the interpreter. While this is a particularly happy moment for the interpreter, they know it is time to abandon the text they are analyzing and proceed on their own (Agamben, 2009, p. 39-40, free translation).

The hypothesis underlying this reflection is that, although Lissovsky's essays and analyses on image and photography seem to focus on historical and aesthetic issues, there is a powerful philosophical element related to the ethical-political question of the moment. This element becomes more evident when we delve into Benjamin's texts. I dare say that the reason for this lies in the different contexts lived by these two authors, particularly the moment of danger (fascism) that was more overtly looming in Germany in the first half of the 20th century. This slight historical disparity, however, makes all the difference and compels us to think about history, as well as photography, within a broader and less obvious horizon—that is, the meaning of labor, progress, and technology assumed within them. In this horizon, aesthetics appears as an ethical-political epiphenomenon, a refinement of labor that, at its base, holds the ideal of (political) liberation, virtue, and human happiness (ethics).

⁴ This author is mentioned numerous times in the course.

I believe that uncovering such a philosophical element in Lissovsky's writings is important, both for its connection to Benjamin's concerns with fascism and for thinking about how to open and disarticulate it from within. This is not to claim that Lissovsky's interest in ethics or politics was residual or peripheral in his texts, nor, conversely, to place him in a messianic position. The aim, rather, is to imagine ways out of this politico-theological organization that, for some time, has reigned and produced asymmetries, exclusions, and genocides across the planet. Therefore, at the end of this essay, some questions will be raised in contrast to this philosophical position, with the objective, of course, of discussing its value.

Photography, the Instant—A Flash in the Moment of Danger

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of exception' in which we live is, in fact, the general rule. We must construct a concept of history that matches this truth.

Walter Benjamin

The historical question, or rather, the way we have experienced time as an existential dimension, becomes particularly significant in this construction as it emerges as a landscape or infinite backdrop where the issue presents itself. Benjamin—just as Lissovsky, following in his path—states it as:

Articulating the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was." It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger. Historical materialism should hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger (Benjamin, 2006, p. 391).

But the historical landscape can only emerge as such—like language, another actor in the photographic scene—through interaction with the other elements⁵. At its core is the human being, not yet completely abandoned by God, with their gaze fixed on progress.

In this frame, technique appears as a decisive but also paradoxical element: on the one hand, it gives the human being the conditions to be present in the

⁵ I was reminded of this photographic metaphor while reviewing notes from the class that took place on May 25. One of the reference texts was "The Subject as Gesture" by Agamben (2007), where the claim is made that discursivity—language?—is the Other of the subject.

scene, occupying its center; on the other hand, it petrifies them in the landscape, immobilizing the *dynamis* of the whole, the movement of its semiotic forces.

The difference in this scene is the labor, the photographer's operation of bringing the whole to life, releasing the entities that compose it to their ultimate destiny. But how? Would anyone with a camera have enough skill to do so?

In the text "*Dez proposições acerca do futuro da fotografia e dos fotógrafos do futuro*," not only does Lissovsky present the aesthetic sensitivity necessary for this awakening but he also leaves traces of the ethics and politics of the moment. Here, we hear the echo of Benjamin's voice on redemption as the culminating point of temporal convergence (past, present, and future together) and the liberation of the photographed entities—a moment of great fullness and beauty.

The aesthetic demand is, of course, achieved through the technical readiness of the photographer and the device. But the aura of photography is not found there. It resides in photography's ethical dimension as "waiting," "haunting," "a gaze meant for us," or simply as "all of us." It is also found in the political condition that opens up when photography awakens a "survivor," "the time that remains," "a reserve of the future," "a dream," or simply, "a life" (Lissovsky, 2011).

Reminiscence stands against the drive of science to describe history "as it really was." Against progress's tendency to eliminate haunting and dreaming for the sake of revealing truth, stands magic.

That is why I believe Vilém Flusser suggested that the task of a 'philosophy of photography' was to 'point the way to freedom.' For him, the camera represented the prototype of all quantum devices, the spearhead of the 'totalitarianism of miniature apparatuses.' The only possible exercise of freedom in the modern scene was to learn to 'play against the apparatus,' a practice in which, according to him, photographers were already 'unconsciously' engaged. I believe the field where this game took place was this interval that photography sought to infinitely expand within the narrow limits of the instantaneous technical device (Lissovsky, 2011, p. 11, free translation).

Thus, the issue of photographic aura can be framed not as a primarily aesthetic matter but as one of ethics and politics. This assertion derives from the photographer's work in retaining within the piece a reserve of dreams, of life, a gaze directed at us, an expectation of a future time, etc., addressed to those who encounter the redeemed moment.

It is a sensitivity that goes beyond mere contemplation or enjoyment of the work. For such sensitivity is also one of welcoming, of otherness, of compassion, and pity. It is a perception of catastrophe that demands an aptitude for dreaming, utopia, and freedom. As stated by Lissovsky (1997, p. 99, free translation): “the issue of the aura was never solely about its disappearance, but rather, and more importantly, about its rediscovery.”

This task, however, calls for superhuman effort. But is this not the same demand we find in Benjamin when he recalls a great thinker on labor? “Smelling a rat, Marx countered that ‘the man who possesses no other property than his labor power’ must of necessity become “The slave of other men who have made themselves” (Benjamin, 2006, p. 393).

In my view, Lissovsky’s merit—along with the value of his writings—lies in the evocation of mystical figures, such as the moment, the tiger, the otter, the diviner, etc., which point to that superhuman effort. Such figures are paramount for thinking about strategies—including pedagogical ones—capable of interrupting the automatism of contemporary image production.

The work of composing the photographic scene demands an aesthetics, but only because it is guided by an ethical and political perception. That is, an openness to the other, to the future, the liberation of the entities immobilized within it. It is this perception that will guide the photographer in their work of awakening and disenchanting the world through technique.

Such figures thus offer the photographer an alternative way of approaching their subjects. No longer perceiving nature as property or availability, but as togetherness in discovery. It is no longer the technifying disposition of appropriation, but, conversely, the liberation of dreams, of frozen images and movements. “These fantasies illustrate a kind of labor which, far from exploiting nature, liberates the creations that sleep, like virtualities, in its womb.” (Benjamin, 2006, p. 394).

In the aura, ethics and politics converge in aesthetics. Therefore, and more than ever, their reunion is urgent. Not in the name of rigor, artistic erudition, or the authenticity of popular culture, but to overcome the “totalitarianism of miniature apparatuses” (Lissovsky, 2011, p. 11, free translation), which have spread across households worldwide, from drones to smartphones.

Moreover, in the face of the great resignation and melancholy that seemingly define our current time, the aura may provide the necessary enchantment to propel us into any future (or dream), or at least interrupt the flow of despair, fear, and loneliness that has torn us apart.

Final Considerations

*It is in the indeterminacy of waiting that photography
resists and produces a subject.*

Maurício Lissovsky

I was unable to satisfactorily follow up the developments of the method of redemption proposed by Lissovsky and his students. Nor did I find works that expanded the critical view of history and photography from a mystical perspective—except for those discussed in the course. I believe the inestimable value of this method lies in the evocation of a “superhuman” capable of straining a temporality or an order of the visible that had previously been unequivocal and stable. That’s how I was captured by it: the method, as taught by academic semantics, initially suggests a technique for dominating nature; in fact, it was an intercessor of science that restored movement, entities, and discourses that had been paralyzed or dormant.

If fascism can be recognized, as Benjamin proposed, in the conditions presiding over its emergence—when progress becomes an absolute value, when techno-scientific teleology is perceived as the only possible temporality—the urgency of the method of redemption becomes all the more apparent. To value it in the name of another *ethos*—as I have sought to do through this modest tribute to Lissovsky—means going beyond exegesis or its mere instrumental application. It is essential that we reflect on and problematize its foundations, in order to refine the theorization and make it conceptually rigorous, for the historical situation has not played in its favor.

To conclude, I raise a few questions aimed at the continuity of Lissovsky’s work. These are inquiries I have retrieved from readings, lectures, and debates during the course. While their answers may not compose a coherent whole, they at least undo the tendency to simplify the challenges that the present moment imposes upon us.

1. In the method of redemption, “universal history” is critiqued through historicism and the teleology of progress (the image of “empty and homogeneous time”), in favor of a perspective of historical materialism that does not disregard time as a present saturated with tensions. It is this concept of time that allows the learned photographer and the historian of small histories to enact the moment through waiting. However, this concept leads to another universalism, since, in the redemption of the moment “the totality of the historical process” is preserved and transcended, as highlighted by Benjamin. Unless one can reconcile the two, the notions of empty and homogeneous time and the monad filled with tensions are tantamount in themselves.

Thus, a question arises: Does the historian of small histories depend on the grand history of progress to carry them out, just as the learned photographer depends on the future illiterate? Do these histories (or images) run together or in parallel? In what distribution or combination?

2. As a messianic task, the redemption of the event by the photographer and the historian seems to be anchored in the same philosophy (that of the subject) that is constantly invoked by totalitarian leaders. How can we prevent the aesthetic discourse of redemption from being appropriated by political programs or ideologies?

3. Tradition constitutes a point of anchorage between the past and the future in the present. Perhaps the great catastrophe of progress was its disregard for tradition, and even its attempt to eliminate it in the name of technoscience. Fascist movements, on the contrary, never ignored it. Exploiting this gap in progress and constantly reinventing tradition, they have won every battle. So, how could the method of redemption differentiate itself and, ultimately, overcome this revisionist wave that—for the same reasons as the revolutionary left—seeks to recover forgotten histories in order to keep them alive in the present?

I believe these questions cannot be reasonably answered without a deep consideration of their ethical and political implications.

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