Ian Grosvenor

Chapter 1

“Around the Table”: Consumption, Ritual, and Identity. A Visual Essay

Introduction

History decays into images, not into stories . . .¹

– Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (1999)

Fig. 1.1: “Prince Albert School, Birmingham, UK, 1997.” Photographer Ian Grosvenor, PrivateCollection.

This essay has been framed by two events: a workshop in 2018 and an exhibition the following year. The workshop at a conference in Berlin used photographs generated nearly twenty years earlier, largely through a school-based history research project,

¹ Walter Benjamin, “On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress,” in *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belnap Press, 1999), N11.4, 476.

which had employed Walter Benjamin's idea of montage as a conceptual framework.² The purpose of the workshop was to ascertain whether the archive of research images and the use of montage as a mechanism for engagement could address concerns which had emerged in the last decade or so – namely, the focus on history of the spatial, the emotional and the sensory. During the workshop, a lot of interest was focused on a single classroom image (Fig. 1.1) and the position of chairs on the classroom table. Some participants said that they were positioned “wrong” and should have been inverted with the legs upright so that no dirt, matter out of place, was transferred onto the table. This observation opened up further discussion around the different ways in which the ending of the school day was marked – for example, that children would individually put their chair on the table, and this being followed by everyone standing and communally reciting the Lord's Prayer. The discussion recalled research on the choreography of schooling and the rituals of school spaces.³

The exhibition, *Feast for the Eyes – The Story of Food in Photography* at The Photographers Gallery, London in the autumn of 2019 explored how food is “personal and social, economic and political” and “rich in symbolism and connotation.” Presented over two floors and featuring over 140 works, the exhibition was arranged around three key themes: *Still Life* traced food photography's relationship to the popular genre in painting, *Playing with Food* showed what happens when food photography was “infused with humour, fun and irony;” and *Around the Table* looked at rituals associated with the consumption of food and “the cultural identities reflected through the food we eat and people we eat with.” To assist visitor engagement, the exhibition curators offered some guidance in terms of reference points:

Whether a daily meal or decadent feast, food brings people together and is part of our sense of community and belonging. The table top, food counter, or picnic basket is as much a psychological space as a physical one, where human interactions play out, manners and taste are learned and performed. When photographed, these moments present layers of identity – personal, familial, cultural and political. They tap into the strongly held notions of good living, health, abundance and status often deployed in advertising and propaganda. Here photographs reflect the social values of their time and place, revealing how food can represent who we are, and how we see ourselves and others.⁴

² International Standing Conference for History of Education, Standing Working Group, *Objects, Senses and the Material World of Schooling*, “Visualising Past Schools: Using Montage,” Organizers: Ian Grosvenor and Martin Lawn, Berlin, August 31, 2019.

³ See Betty Eggermont, “The Choreography of Schooling as a Site of Struggle: Belgian Primary Schools, 1880–1940,” *History of Education* 30, no. 2 (2001): 129–140.

⁴ “Around the Table” Introductory Panel, *Feast for the Eyes – The Story of Food in Photography*, The Photographers Gallery, October 18, 2019–February 09, 2020. See also the Gallery Journal, *Loose Associations* 5 (2019) and <https://thephotographersgallery.org.uk/whats-on/exhibition/feast-eyes-story-food-photography> (accessed June, 2020).

Crossing public and private realms, the exhibition raised “deep-seated questions and anxieties about issues such as wealth, poverty, consumption, appetite, tradition, gender, race, desire, pleasure, revulsion and domesticity.”⁵ It pointed to the fundamental connection between food and culture, and how the repetitive, embodied practice of eating is part of the rituals of belonging and identity formation.

Together, the workshop and the exhibition shaped the focus of this essay, namely children, food and eating; its form, a photo-essay; its title, “*Around the Table*”: *Consumption, Ritual, and Identity*; and a way of working, Benjamin’s “montage.” What follows is an explanation of the method and the task.

Perception and Meaning Making

In *Blind Spot* (2017), the art historian and photographer Teju Cole writes, “‘We see the world:’ this simple statement becomes (Merleau-Ponty has also noted this) a tangled tree of meanings. Which world? See how? We who?”⁶ Merleau-Ponty in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) had argued that “Because we are in the world . . . we are condemned to meaning” and referred to phenomenology as a “will to seize the meaning of the world . . . as that meaning comes into being.”⁷ Cole’s observation points to the plural rather than Merleau-Ponty’s singular meaning, that what the camera sees and what we see are not the same. Photographs by their very nature are “randomly inclusive” carrying an excess of information as the lens captures everything inside its frame.⁸ Details escape our eyes. At first, an image can appear ambiguous to the viewer and its meaning initially uncertain. As John Berger writes, “meaning is not instantaneous,” but rather “is discovered in what connects . . . Without a story, without an unfolding, there is no meaning.” A photograph arrests the flow of time in which the event photographed once existed. The moment is frozen. There is, as Berger described, an “abyss” – the time/space between the moment captured/frozen on film and the moment of looking. He continues, “An instant photographed can only acquire meaning in so far as the viewer can read into a duration extending beyond itself.”⁹ However, as soon as photographs are used with words/captions they “guarantee each other.” As Cole notes in his essay *Against Neutrality*: “You believe the words more because the photograph verifies them and trust the photograph because you trust

5 <https://thephotographersgallery.org.uk/whats-on/exhibition/feast-eyes-story-food-photography> (accessed June, 2020).

6 Teju Cole, *Blind Spot* (London: Faber & Faber, 2017), 272.

7 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), 83–84.

8 Elizabeth Edwards, “Entangled Documents: Visualised Histories,” in *Susan Meiselas: In History*, ed. Kristen Lubben (Gottingen: Steidl, 2008), 330–341.

9 John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 87–89.

the words.”¹⁰ What the viewer sees is given meaning by the words. When photographs enter an archive, they are catalogued, and words are ascribed to them to enable their accessibility for users. When they are reproduced in books and articles, they are given a title, a caption. In both cases, the words direct our looking. Words when used with images can anchor meanings; however, change the words and the original meaning can be displaced, even though the image and what is captured remains the same.

On Montage

Juxtaposing verbal and visual fragments was central to Walter Benjamin’s cut-and-paste practices of montage. Benjamin’s critical analysis of modernity revolved around documenting the experience of modernity and making visible the invisible. This was an enterprise for which, his contemporary Ernst Bloch believed, Benjamin to be particularly equipped, as he possessed:

a unique gaze for the significant detail, for what lies alongside, for those fresh elements which, in thinking and in the world, arise from here, for the individual things (*Einzelsein*) which intrude in an unaccustomed and non-schematic way, things which do not fit in with the usual lot and therefore deserve particular, incisive attention.¹¹

For Benjamin, the technology of the camera enabled photography to penetrate the surface of everyday, observed reality. It enabled the “traces” – the everyday minutiae of the modern experience – to be retrieved. It made analyzable “things which had heretofore floated along unnoticed in the broad stream of perception.”¹² In representing the modern experience Benjamin rejected conventional narrative structures in favor of montage:

Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t say anything: merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse – these I will not inventory but allow, in the only possible way, to come into their own: by making use of them.¹³

Montage offered the possibility “of doing justice” of “giving shape” to the modern experience.¹⁴ “Traces” of the modern experience, whether visual or literary, were to be assembled and put “to use” to bring elements of the past, the debris of history, into the present. At the same time, such images – liberated from their original context –

¹⁰ Teju Cole, “Against Neutrality,” in *Known and Strange Things* (London: Faber & Faber, 2016), 212.

¹¹ Ernst Bloch, “Recollections of Walter Benjamin,” in *Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, ed. Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 340.

¹² Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Fontana, 1973), 237.

¹³ Benjamin, “On the Theory of Knowledge,” N1a, 8, 460.

¹⁴ Howard Caygill, *The Colour of Experience* (London: Routledge, 1998), 64.

were juxtaposed in a montage of modernity which illuminated elements of common experience, but also disjuncture which served to provoke and disconcert the viewer/reader. The critical power of montage was its ability to shock: “To bring about an explosion which would bring down the Dream House of History by forcing a discarded, forgotten, even repressed past into an unfamiliar, unreconciled constellation with the present.”¹⁵ The strange became familiar and the familiar became strange. Montage also offered viewers points of entry in the labyrinth of personal reminiscences of the modern experience. As Susan Buck-Morrs wrote, the mosaic of modern images was “only half the text. The reader of Benjamin’s generation was to provide the other half of the picture from the fleeting images of his or her lived experiences.”¹⁶ Montage was, therefore, a mechanism for conjuring and linking people and experiences, moments and discontinuities associated with living in the modern world. It offers the historian both a method and a task.

Engaging with Montage

Following Benjamin, this essay presents the reader/viewer with twelve images.¹⁷ They stand as individual artefacts associated with children and the cultural practice of eating, but with no anchoring captions to locate them in time and space. Each of the images have been taken out of history, removed from their original context. The photographs come from a range of archival sources and have been assembled and juxtaposed to produce mutual illumination, to trigger multiple ways of knowing and multiple sets of meanings, to speak to each other, to surface in words what is peculiar, what is unsaid, what is insignificant, what is excluded, and what is at the margin. The photographs have been deployed to confront the reader/viewer with the possibility of seeing what otherwise might be unseen, and to make connections so as to reveal the complex interrelations of continuity and disjuncture relating to the cultural practice of eating. Of course, it is one thing to confront the reader, but it is another to translate this act into critical engagement with the visual. As indicated earlier, the inclusive nature of the photograph – the detail, the proliferation

¹⁵ Derek Gregory, “Interventions in the Historical Geography of Modernity: Social Theory, Spatiality and the Politics of Representation,” *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography* 73, no. 1, *Meaning and Modernity: Cultural Geographies of the Invisible and the Concrete* (1991): 28.

¹⁶ Susan Buck-Morrs, *The Dialectics of Seeing. Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 292.

¹⁷ See also Ian Grosvenor, Martin Lawn, António Nóvoa, Kate Rousmaniere, and Harry Smaller, “Reading Educational Spaces: The Photographs of Paulo Catrica,” *Paedagogica Historica* 40, no. 3, (2004): 315–332; Ian Grosvenor, Inés Dussel, Iveta Kestere, Karin Priem, Lisa Rosén Rasmussen, and Angelo Van Gorp, “‘We Seek Revelation With our Eyes’: Engaging with School Cultures Through Montage,” *Encounters in Theory and History of Education* 17 (2016): 2–26.

of signs and the excess of data – can overwhelm the eye of the viewer. To avoid this, the historian of photography Michel Frizot advises adopting “an active, attentive gaze,” one that scans photographs surfaces “in a sporadic, apparently disorganized process, determining reference points, identifying distinct signs and establishing mental connections between them.”¹⁸ In terms of looking and seeing, the American artist John Baldessari (1931–2020) used “found”¹⁹ photographs to challenge habitual ways of seeing, and recommended looking at an image “as if you have never seen it before. Examine it from every side, draw its outline with your eyes or in the air with your hands. And saturate yourself with it.”²⁰ He also said about his own practice of working with photographs: “What I am looking at in photographs is usually the stuff that’s not too ‘interesting’, it’s the stuff you see in out of the corner of your eye, rather than what you normally focus on”²¹ The early theorist of the image Roland Barthes felt that “in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away . . . to shut my eyes, to allow the detail to rise of its own accord into affective consciousness.”²² Whatever critical strategies are employed, having engaged with the photographs and brought personal insights drawn from lived experience into the mix, additional conjectures and connections can be produced by consulting the “anchoring words” found at the end of the chapter, where the provenance and titles of each of the photographs are listed.

It could be argued that this would have been a good point in this framing text for the author to offer some concrete examples of seeing what otherwise might be unseen, by identifying for the reader some of the connections between the twelve images. However, images and words have a problematic relationship. When photographs enter an archive, they are catalogued, and words are ascribed to them to enable their accessibility for users; and when they are reproduced in books and articles, they are given a title, a caption. In other words, as soon as photographs are used with words “they produce together an effect of certainty . . . The photograph, irrefutable as evidence but weak in meaning, is given a meaning by the words. And the words, which by themselves remain at the level of generalization, are given specific authority by the irrefutability of the photograph.”²³ In sum, words direct our looking. Hence separating details of the

¹⁸ Michel Frizot, *Every Photograph Is an Enigma* (Paris: Maison Européenne de la Photographie, 2015), 21.

¹⁹ For a discussion of “found” photographs, see Ian Grosvenor and Gyöngyvér Pataki, “‘LOOK AT ME.’ The Enigma and Value of ‘Found’ Photographs for Historians of Education,” in *Appearances Matter: The Visual in Educational History*, ed. Tim Allender, Inés Dussel, Ian Grosvenor, and Karin Priem (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2021), 259–278.

²⁰ John Baldessari, *Subject Matter 1996–98*, Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Barcelona, <https://www.macba.cat/en/exhibitions-activities/exhibitions/john-baldessari> (accessed June, 2020).

²¹ John Baldessari, “Some Notes on Recent Work” (1989) quoted <https://www.modernamuseet.se/stockholm/en/exhibitions/john-baldessari/introduction-john-baldessari/> (accessed June, 2020).

²² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 1993), 53–54.

²³ John Berger, “Appearances. The Ambiguity of the Photograph,” in John Berger, *Understanding a Photograph*, ed. Geoff Dyer (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 66.

provenance and titles of the photographs from their image so as to reinforce the focus on the act of looking. As James Agee advised in *A Way of Seeing* (1946): “I have avoided any attempt to discuss the ‘meanings’ of the photographs, feeling that this is best left as an affair between the pictures themselves and the reader.”²⁴ Finally, while the selection and arrangement of the montage was necessarily calculated, alternative arrangements might produce different threads of connections and meanings, but in the process of engagement with the images there is no closure, only the action of “explicitly and implicitly, raising as many questions as are answered” about consumption, ritual, and identity around the table.²⁵

²⁴ James Agee, “An Essay,” in *A Way of Seeing, Photographs of Helen Levitt*, 4th edition (Film Documents LLC: Salt Lake City, UT, 2019). Agee was commenting on the photographs of Helen Levitt.

²⁵ Allan Pred, *Recognising European Modernities. A Montage of the Present* (London: Routledge, 1995), 27.

MENU 25-2-80

STARTERS	10-DAY'S MAIN DISH
FRUIT JUICES 10p	MINCE & DUMPLINGS 25s
10-DAY'S SOUP 10p	CHIPS POTS & Veg 10p
CHICKEN 10p	10-DAY'S SALAD 25p
DAILY	CHEESE & EGG 16p
SAUSAGE ROLLS 14p	10-DAY'S SNACKS
BACON 18p	HOT DOGS
SAUSAGES 16p	BEEF BURGERS
EGG 8p	SPAM PIZZA
BACON & EGG 24p	SWEETS
SAUSAGE & EGG 24p	10-DAY'S SWEETS
SALADS 25p	CURRANT & CHERRY 10p
ROUGHMAN'S LUNCH 36p	SUICE & CUSTARD
PORTION OF CHIPS 11p	DAILY
" POTATOES 8p	CHEESE & BISCUITS 10p
" VEGETABLES 5p	COFFEE & BISCUIT 10p
POT OF CREAM 1p	MILK SHAKE & BISCUIT 12p
SANDWICHES 16p	FRESH FRUIT 10p
EGG & TOMATO ROLLS 16p	ICE CREAM 10p
" & CHEESE 16p	YOGHURT 10p
	MERINGUE 10p
	CHEESE & FRUIT SODA 10p
	PIECE OF CAKE 10p
	BISCUIT 10p

Fig. 1.2

Fig. 1.3

Fig. 1.4

Fig. 1.5

Fig. 1.6

Fig. 1.7

Fig. 1.8

Fig. 1.9

Fig. 1.10

Fig. 1.11

Fig. 1.12

Fig. 1.13

Image Credits

- Fig. 1.2:** “School dinner menu, North East England, February 25, 1980.” Unknown Photographer. Creative Commons JS 40480112.
- Fig. 1.3:** Bill Brandt, “Slum Housing near the Malden Road, London, 1943.” The Bournville Village Trust, Birmingham City Archives, Album 3. F. L.S.1. Reproduced with the permission of the Library of Birmingham.
- Fig. 1.4:** Lisel Haas, Lisel Haas Estate, Birmingham City Archives, MS 2202 Box 4–1b. Reproduced with the permission of the Library of Birmingham.
- Fig. 1.5:** “Reperto de copa de leche (Distribution of a glass of milk).” Quinquela Martín School, 1938. Reproduced with the permission of the Archivo General de la Nación, Buenos Aires, Argentina.
- Fig. 1.6:** “Kinder während des Essens (Children while eating) 1953.” Roger Rossing/Renate Rossing, Deutsche Fotothek, Creative Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0 de.
- Fig. 1.7:** Dining room of the Alfredo Calderón School, 1936. Reproduced with the permission of the Fundación Angel Llorca, Madrid, Spain.
- Fig. 1.8:** “Materiality of Eating, after Wright Morris.” Photographer Ian Grosvenor. Private Collection.
- Fig. 1.9:** “The Macedonian Campaign, 1916,” © Imperial War Museum Q 31806.
- Fig. 1.10:** “Street party to commemorate the Jubilee of King George V, Dartmouth Street, Birmingham 1935.” Unknown photographer, Birmingham City Archives, WK-A12-20. Reproduced with the permission of the Library of Birmingham.
- Fig. 1.11:** “Muslims in Britain: Eid Ul Fitr Celebrations, 1941.” © Imperial War Museum, D5141.
- Fig. 1.12:** Edith Tudor-Hart, “Basque Refugee Children Preparing Vegetables, North Stoneham Camp, Hampshire.” 1937. PGP279.38. National Galleries of Scotland. Presented by Wolfgang Suschitzky, 2004. © held jointly by Peter Suschitzky, Julia Donat & Mischa Donat.
- Fig. 1.13:** “School dining room, Tyneside, North East England.” Unknown Photographer. Creative Commons, JS40084940.

Bibliography

- Agee, James. “An Essay.” In *A Way of Seeing, Photographs of Helen Levitt*, 4th edition. Salt Lake City, Ut: Film Documents LLC, 2019.
- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucinda*, trans. Richard Howard. London: Vintage, 1993.
- Benjamin, Walter. “On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress.” In *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Belnap Press, 1999, 456–488.
- Benjamin, Walter. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt. London: Fontana, 1973, 219–253.
- Berger, John. “Appearances. The Ambiguity of the Photograph.” In John Berger, *Understanding a Photograph*, edited by Geoff Dyer. London: Penguin Books, 2013, 61–98.
- Berger, John, and Jean Mohr. *Another Way of Telling*. New York: Pantheon, 1982.
- Bloch, Ernst. “Recollections of Walter Benjamin.” In *Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, edited by Gary Smith. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988, 338–345.
- Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Dialectics of Seeing. Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991.
- Caygill, Howard. *The Colour of Experience*. London: Routledge, 1998.
- Cole, Teju. “Against Neutrality.” In *Known and Strange Things*. London: Faber & Faber, 2016.
- Cole, Teju. *Blind Spot*. London: Faber & Faber, 2017.

- Edwards, Elizabeth. “Entangled Documents: Visualised Histories.” In *Susan Meiselas: In History*, edited by Kristen Lubben. Gottingen: Steidl, 2008, 330–341.
- Eggermont, Betty. “The Choreography of Schooling as a Site of Struggle: Belgian Primary Schools, 1880–1940.” *History of Education* 30, no. 2 (2001): 129–140.
- Frizot, Michel. *Every Photograph Is an Enigma*. Paris: Maison Européenne de la Photographie, 2015.
- Gregory, Derek. “Interventions in the Historical Geography of Modernity: Social Theory, Spatiality and the Politics of Representation.” *Geografiska Annaler, Series B, Human Geography* 73, no. 1, *Meaning and Modernity: Cultural Geographies of the Invisible and the Concrete* (1991): 17–44.
- Grosvenor, Ian, and Gyöngyvér Pataki. “‘LOOK AT ME.’ The Enigma and Value of ‘Found’ Photographs for Historians of Education.” In *Appearances Matter: The Visual in Educational History*, edited by Tim Allender, Inés Dussel, Ian Grosvenor, and Karin Priem, 259–278. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2021.
- Grosvenor, Ian, Inés Dussel, Iveta Kestere, Karin Priem, Lisa Rosén Rasmussen, and Angelo Van Gorp. “‘We Seek Revelation with Our Eyes’: Engaging with School Cultures Through Montage.” *Encounters in Theory and History of Education* 17 (2016): 2–26.
- Grosvenor, Ian, Martin Lawn, and António Nóvoa, Kate Rousmaniere and Harry Smaller. “Reading Educational Spaces: The Photographs of Paulo Catrica.” *Paedagogica Historica* 40, no. 3 (2004): 315–332.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2002.
- Pred, Allan. *Recognising European Modernities. A Montage of the Present*. London: Routledge, 1995.