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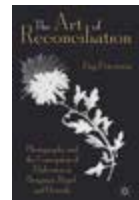
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Dag Petersson

The Art of Reconciliation: Photography and the Conception of Dialectics in Benjamin, Hegel, and Derrida

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 336 pp. Cloth \$100.00 (9781137029935)



[Daniel Rubinstein](#)

At least since Plato's claim that it is the foundation of true knowledge, light has been identified by the Western philosophical canon as the source of universal wisdom. It is this implied connection between physical light and rationality that prompts Dag Petersson to assert in *The Art of Reconciliation* that photography is the visual counterpart of dialectical logic, because dialectics and photography both are forms of light-writing.

In order to substantiate his view of photography as the "self portrait" of dialectics (xv), Petersson's first move is to explain that dialectics is a rigorously symmetrical mode of reasoning that aims to achieve absolute unity through the repetitive reconciliation of contradictions (xii). At the heart of the dialectical procedure is the binary opposition between two entities that are reconciled through the process of mediation, G. W. F. Hegel's famous *Aufhebung*, usually translated as sublation. Petersson explains that "*Aufhebung* depends on the ability of light to gain intelligible form" (xv), and that "light is . . . the primal means of transition from the Christian word of reconciliation to the responsibility of aesthetics" (xv). His next move is to establish photography as "light-writing" (xv). He then goes on to assert that the aim of the book is "to commence a meditation on the writing of light while reflecting on the self-portrait of dialectical representation" (xv). Petersson insists that photography "belongs exclusively to dialectics" (xvi) because it "carries a difference that separates, and manages to keep separated, distinct modes of dialectic thinking" (xvi–xvii). Photography is therefore a kind of glue that is holding together a number of dialectical threads, but it can only perform this role if it relinquishes any demands for its own difference from modes of logical reasoning: "photography is less present to itself than to the series of conceptual threads that are formed around it" (xvii). This leads Petersson to assert that the "photographic image cannot be absolutely determined" (xvii)—it neither has its own ontology (essential being), nor is it an epistemology (form of knowledge), nor is it a simulacra (xvii). Nevertheless photography seems to possess its own essence: "photographs merely help us to see the world differently. Things become visible to us in a different way with photographs, a way that is irreducible to how we perceive with our bodies and our eyes or with pens or paint" (22). The last quotation is illuminating, as it suggests that in order to constitute photography as the "metaphor for the dialectical process itself" (21), Petersson has to conceive of it as pure abstraction: neither a sensual perception nor an intellectual cognition but something like a religious revelation that appears "at the origin of dialectical thought" (xix). Only then can photography fulfill the role that Petersson's book allocates to it—that is, "a pivot or an axis from where the being of dialectical expression is determined" (xvi).

The Art of Reconciliation is a collection of essays that offer a "philological reading" (25) of a number of important texts. The book is divided into three parts: the first is comprised of six essays on Walter Benjamin; the second contains two essays on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (trans. A. V. Miller, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); and the third contains one essay on Jacques Derrida's *Glas* (trans. John P. Leavey Jr. and Richard Rand, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990) and one on Jean Genet's play *Elle* (Décines: L'Arbalète, 1989). Finally, there is an appendix with a translation of one of Benjamin's fragments. It is slightly troubling that a book that opens with a bold conceptual claim does not contain a conclusion where the fulfillment of this claim is evaluated. Therefore on finishing *The Art of Reconciliation* I was still unsure whether I had read a monograph or a collection of loosely connected essays that taken together seem to reaffirm the notion that every dialectic has to come up against the impossibility of accounting for its origin. The problem with this statement is not that it is wrong, but that it has been made frequently, not least by Benjamin and Derrida: Benjamin dismantles Hegelian dialectics in the *Origin of German Tragic Drama* (trans. John Osborne, London: Verso, 1998) and Derrida criticizes dialectics across a number of key texts, as in *Dissemination* (trans. Barbara Johnson, Chicago:

University of Chicago Press, 1983).

More troubling is the book's presumption of an intimate affinity between dialectics and photography. While Hegel saw light as the physical counterpart of thought, this is hardly an indication—as Petersson would have it—that photography should tie its fate to that of dialectics as this forces a conception of photography as a mode of revelation that shines a light of truth that is neither of human nor of earthly origin. And while Petersson does not spell out the political credo of his book or its ideological sympathies, some of them get unmasked by reading the index. Not surprisingly perhaps, “religion” and “religious” appear in the book on seventy-eight pages, “Christ” and “Christian” on thirty-eight pages, and “God” (always capitalized) on thirty-seven pages. The word “philosophy” is not mentioned in the index at all, and, despite the claim on the back cover that “the book discovers a desire for light-writing,” “desire” is also never mentioned.

To be sure, “photo-graphy” literally means *drawing with light*, but even the most cursory glance at photography as it is practiced, used, and theorized will reveal that it is not just one thing but an assemblage of loosely connected activities, processes, and concepts that have little in common and certainly cannot all be explained as “light-writing.” Never mind the fact that some photographic practices use other forms of radiation than visible light (such as x-rays), and others employ long chains of algorithmic processes that modify and often obliterate the initial image. To claim, as Petersson does, that “light-writing” is the essence of photography is to be impervious to the fact that in the digital age photographs have the ability to be completely detached from any autonomous reality and cannot be determined solely by the logic of visual aesthetics.

By considering photography as “the art of reconciliation,” Petersson is reviving the old notion of binary opposition (it takes two to reconcile) between presence and absence, subject and object, etc. While this representational model was the staple of photography theory in the 1980s, today it is impossible to adhere to the idea that photography is both universal and immune to change. Petersson posits this dualistic schema as the precondition for photography conceived as the totality of its mediated parts, and therefore his book is unable to account for aspects of photography that are contiguous, sensuous, and non-identical. The result is a failure to affirm multiplicity and plurality, which might account for photography as it is currently practiced throughout the world. Petersson's conception of photography is essentialist in his situating of it at the heart of philosophical idealism—rooted in the absolutism of Hegelian dialectics and harking back to Platonic Forms. As a result, Petersson mostly ignores the diversity of practices, forces, and events that characterize contemporary photography, whereas considering these might provoke the realization that photography is not an equilibrium of binary oppositions, but a constellation of disjointed and fragmentary practices.

According to the author's declaration on the first page, the book has been more than ten years in the making (vii). This might go some way in explaining why it has nothing to say about the triumph of the digital image as the current face of photography, and why it does not mention any of the critical engagements with photography from the last decade, such as François Laruelle's *The Concept of Non-Photography* (Falmouth, New York: Urbanoimc, 2011). The book also ignores wide-ranging critiques of dialectical logic and affirmations of other, less logocentric philosophies of the image, as found in the works of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Jean François Lyotard, Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Johnny Golding—to name a few. And given its extensive engagement with Benjamin, it is surprising that some of the most significant studies of his work were not mentioned, such as Carol Jacobs's *In the Language of Walter Benjamin* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000).

The last fifty years have seen a dramatic turn in continental philosophy away from the Enlightenment's obsession with light as the expression of rational knowledge and toward more sensual, affective, and anti-representationalist ways of thinking that challenge the hierarchical structures implicit in the dialectical, linguistic, and structuralist models associated with this obsession. In previous work, Petersson appears to have been keenly aware of the anti-dialectical turn and of the reconfiguration of photography through recent technologies of digitalization and cloning (see his essay “Transformations of Readability and Time,” in Dag Petersson and Erik Stensskog, eds., *Actualities of Aura*, Copenhagen: Nordic Summer University Press, 2005). One wonders why these important insights did not find their way into *The Art of Reconciliation*. Petersson's philological analysis might be illuminating for those readers interested in the history of dialectical thought, but for reasons mentioned above, the book will strike many others as an anachronism, out of step with the present with which it is unable to reconcile.

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