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Photographs and History in *Istanbul: Memories and the city*

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Abstract

Since the invention of photography it has found itself a unique place in autobiography literature. Having more than a direct relationship, photographs introduce a complex play of signifiers in a text. The language frames and explains a photograph that is used; photographs address the question of memory in a text. Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul: Memories and the City* is a reminiscence of his early life and the Old Istanbul. The photographs of Pamuk, his family and the Istanbul he grew up in punctuate the flow of the narrative effectively.

Keywords: Photograph, Hüzüin, text, image, Punctum, aura

Introduction

Photographs do not merely typify an abstraction or are not solely an agency of an instrument; they are objects in a social process in a set of relationships in which they are made relevant through different forms of apprehension. The statements an image makes is performative and along with its substantiality give a sensory and concrete access to the photographs, which places them in subjectivities and emotional registers that cannot be simplified to the visual understanding of an image, rather it positions them strongly as what can be termed as "relational objects." Photographs are tangible, sensory things that exist in time and space and thus provide an embodied cultural experience. Photographs, even mere snapshots for the family album, can be understood in cultural terms as they assume a central role in articulating suppressed, contested or ruptured histories. While the association of the link between the photograph and "having-been-there" as Roland Barthes would say is probably universal, photographs are not only about loss, but, about empowerment, reclamation, renewal and contestation.

The book *Istanbul: Memories and the City* is a blend of Pamuk's autobiography and the history of Istanbul during the author's childhood and young adulthood combined with recollection of the Ottoman past of the city, which focuses on the author's and the city's melancholy, or to be more precise it focalizes on the Turkish equivalent of the Western idea of melancholy, hüzüin. There are around two hundred photographs and illustrations in the text, from Orientalist images of the city to photographs by Turkish photographers and a collection of family photographs. The association between image and text does not, however stop there, chapters are titled such as 'Black and White', 'The Photographs in the Dark Museum House' and Istanbul is described by Pamuk as a 'city that mourns over its loss of colour' and there are several chapters dedicated to painting word images by the writers that Pamuk says have inspired him during his growing up days and have helped him to see and understand Istanbul in a way that nobody else could. Pamuk writes: "If we see our city in black and white, it's partly because we know it from the engravings left to us by Western artists: the glorious colours of its past were never painted by local hands...So when magazines or schoolbooks need an image of old Istanbul, they use the black-and-white engravings produced by Western travelers and artists...they prefer to see their past in a more easily reproduced monochrome. For when they gaze into a colourless image, they see their melancholy confirmed." (56)

Through the book Pamuk's traces the history of his love for painting and his desire to establish a career as an artist, the connection he and others feel to the Bosphorus River and its importance to the city, and memories of his learning and experiences.

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The book's dominant theme is the melancholy that continues to affect the author, the Istanbul and the city of Istanbul in general. Pamuk's photographs emerge from a specific moment; they capture subtle aspects of geography of the city in and around the historic meeting point of the Bosphorus and the Golden Horn, as well as reveal the moments when the writer takes a pause and creates meaning from the frames that depict the people and the city. Capturing the light of the Bosphorus and the way it portrays the geography and architecture of Istanbul evokes a feeling of consolation to the author as he claims while the city speaks of defeat, destruction and deprivation, the Bosphorus is a beauty spot which sings of life and happiness. He writes: "On misty, smoky mornings, on rainy, windy nights, you can see it on the domes of the mosques on which flocks of gulls make their homes; you can see it, too, in the clouds of exhaust, in the wreaths of soot rising from stovepipes, in the rusting rubbish bins, the parks and gardens left empty and untended on winter days, and the crowds scurrying home through the mud and the snow on winter evenings; these are the sad joys of black and white Istanbul." Pamuk's pictures that he uses in the novel are a mix of refined and rough images, of the dreamscape and of the ruins and destruction with the cumulative effect of weaving the Ottoman past in the Turkish present.

The novel is a personal memoir of Orhan Pamuk, in which he recounts his childhood and early years as well as portrays the city of Istanbul. Using and describing the photographs Pamuk not only accentuates his early childhood, but also attempts to find cultural and personal identity in the ruins of the city. He writes: "My prolonged study of these photographs led me to appreciate the importance of preserving certain moments for posterity, and as time moved forwards I also came to see what a powerful influence these framed scenes exerted over us as we went about our daily lives." (17) This personal narrative is bestrewn with a parallel narrative of the history of the city, its current condition, and the way it has internalized gloom after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Pamuk's use of photographs provide him evidence for the reality of *hüzün* in Istanbul, as well as for the aesthetic purposes of the photos, pointed out by authors Roland Barthes and Walter Benjamin as 'punctum' and 'aura', respectively.

The camera holds a significant place in the late Ottoman and Turkish modernity, and photography had practically started to invade the personal and public life by then and it was a medium for the state to document the Turkish every day, particularly as evidence of progress. The collection includes human lives, architecture, monuments, panoramas, and urban scenes, a majority of which were taken in and around Istanbul. There is hardly any aesthetic concern here, but rather a bureaucratic one. The challenge of restoring harmony between the modern and the historical legacy of an Islamic empire looms large, along with an unacknowledged anxiety about failure and loss. Much like the city which was striving to look modern in its photographs, Pamuk says his family would also 'pose' for photographs in an attempt to look perfect. Pamuk also comments on the affective role of photography when he compares Abdül hamid's collection as a parallel to his mother's family photo album: "I love these [Hamidian] photographs, devoid of human figures in which [...] everything looks tidier, cleaner, and more modern than it is — just as in my mother's album. I like to think that I've discovered in these strange photographs a range of emotions

that neither the photographer nor [Abdül hamid] ever intended to record." He recollects how the piano, every table, desk and wall were places for exhibiting photographs and how being tired of the day's game he would take refuge in them. He also recalls how his grandmother's entire sitting room was full of photographs. The photographic image, he implies, confesses archival and emotional meaning.

Pamuk received his first camera when he was ten years old. During the rule of the Republicans in Turkey, the camera and photography was the chief means of engaging in the secular modern. Pamuk states, "Our greatest shortcoming, we felt, was never being as modern as we wanted to be. So when posing for the camera, we strove to appear more successful and more modern than we actually were." Pamuk, in his *The Light of the Bosphorus: Orhan Pamuk's Photography in Balkon* contrasts this posed and representational function of the family album with the work of the great Armenian-Turkish photographer Ara Güler: "Until the photographer Ara Güler — whose photographs of the city in the twentieth century remain unsurpassed — began taking photos of daily life in Istanbul in the 1950s, [...] it was rare for the human side of the place to creep into any photographs."

In addition to conveying the important place of photography in Pamuk's aesthetic life, Ara Güler's mid-20th-century black-and-white Istanbul, in many ways reveals the visual source for Pamuk's concept of *hüzün*, the strain of melancholy particular to Istanbul and its inhabitants. Celâl Salik, the journalist writes, "Every photograph is not just the image of a frozen moment, but of the past and future too. Because to take photographs is to nurture hope." By connecting images to an Istanbul novel and alter-ego character, Pamuk reminds us that the photographs are subtexts closely linked to the main text in his work.

Blending reminiscence with history, family photographs with pictures of pashas, metaphysical musing, and accounts of Turkish Writers and, now and again, an imaginative tale, Orhan Pamuk invents an ingenious form to evoke his lifelong home, the city that forged his imagination. He begins with his childhood among the eccentric, extended Pamuk family in the dusty, carpeted, and impenetrable apartment building they shared. In this place came his first intimations of melancholy, an awareness that binds all residents of his city together: a broken home in a country that is struggling to find a framework to present its reality to the world. This elegiac communal spirit suffuses Pamuk's reflections as he introduces the writers and painters through whose eyes he came to see Istanbul. Pamuk and his extended family lived in a five storey apartment house with various parts of the family occupying different floors. They decorated their rooms in a way to appear more westernized than the next family. They had a room in their grandmother's house which displayed their photographs. In the second chapter *The Photographs in the Dark Museum House*, Pamuk describes that their photographs in their living room could be viewed as objects that could trace the roots of their family tree: "There was not a single surface in my grandmother's sitting room that wasn't covered with frames of all sizes. The most imposing were two enormous portraits that hung over the never-used fireplace...any one walking into this museum room to meet their haughty gaze would know at once that the story began with them." (18)

The most prominent portraits in this "museum room" are the ones of Pamuk's grandmother and grandfather. Pamuk

describes the photographs' splendor, saying, "from the way the pictures were positioned on the wall towards each other in the manner still favored by European kings and queens on stamps), anyone walking into this museum room to meet their haughty gaze would know at once that the story began with them". In Benjamin's essay, he writes about "cult value" of art, and how "it is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritualistic function ... the unique value of the "authentic" work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value". In this room, holding the portraits of Pamuk's grandparents to such high, royal significance is a semblance of "aura" found in the cult value of art. In compliance with Benjamin's cult value, the photographed portraits display what Benjamin argues is "melancholy, incomparable beauty," while being heralded in a manner similar to the hierarchy of monarchs or leaders. To extend his personal appreciation for photographs in his life, there exists a collection of photographs in the home of Pamuk's grandmother. Though they are not shown, Pamuk's descriptions explain not only how these photographs intrigue him as though he were speaking not only about Barthean *punctum*, but "aura" as well.

In *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, Pamuk depends on photography to provide historical and literary context as well as archival evidence. The photographs become part of the process of writing; they constitute the supporting 'negative space' of the writing ritual. According to Walter Benjamin, the outsider seeks out the exotic, while for the natives of a city their vision is always mediated by memory and the history of the place itself. Orhan Pamuk's evocation of Istanbul will be unfamiliar to the European tourist, for whom the city is a riot of colour and cacophony but Pamuk like all other Istanbulis sees the city mostly dressed in black and white. In the photographs used in the novel Pamuk portrays the picturesque in Istanbul, the one that John Ruskin explains in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. It is not the new buildings which stands on its own terms that make a landscape picturesque, rather the one on which history has bestowed a unique beauty by granting a new perspective.

The *hüzün* of Istanbul, as Pamuk says, is multiplied by the inhabitants of an entire city, and is so intrinsic to their consciousness that it does not become depressing but poetic, it becomes beautiful. In other words, the past does not hamper the present but makes its way into the present to make it strikingly picturesque. The novelist writes: "In Istanbul's poor neighbourhoods, however, beauty resides entirely in the crumbling city walls, in the grass, ivy, weeds and trees I remember growing from the towers and walls of the castles of Rumelihisari and Anadoluhisari. The beauty of a broken fountain, an old ramshackle mansion, a ruined hundred-year-old gasworks, the crumbling wall of an old mosque...when I visited the city's back streets as a child, these painterly tableaux were so numerous that it was difficult, after a point, to see them as unintended...that gave Istanbul its soul." (330) And though the Istanbulis attempt to westernize, while retaining their eastern heritage, their *hüzün* may follow each individual through their own lives wherever they are in the city, just as the photographs document. Pamuk also describes the *hüzün* he sees in Istanbul in the form of word-image "...the evenings when the sun sets early, of the fathers under the street lamps in the back streets returning home carrying plastic bags. Of the old

Bosphorus ferries moored to deserted stations in the middle of winter, where sleepy sailors scrub the decks, a pail in their hand and one eye on the black-and-white television in the distance...of the covered women who stand at remote bus stops clutching plastic shopping bags and speaking to no one as they wait for the bus that never arrives;...of the crowds of men fishing from the sides of the Galata Bridge; of the cold reading rooms of libraries; of the street photographers...of the clock towers no one ever notices; of the history books in which children read about the victories of the Ottoman Empire and of the beatings these same children receive at home...of the crowds of men smoking cigarettes after the national football matches, which during my childhood never failed to end in abject defeat: I speak of them all." (84-89)

Charles Baudelaire thought that photographs could be used as a tool for capturing reality. In his essay "The Modern Public and Photography", he writes, "let [photography] hasten to enrich the tourist's album, and restore to his eye the precision which his memory may lack." Baudelaire explains here that photographs are better used as a form of evidence, memory aids, or souvenir to a tourist. Appropriately, Pamuk incorporates photographs in the same sense. He has provided a couple of photographs to accompany some of the scenes he would describe. One description is a photograph of cars in Istanbul, photographed by Ara Güler, among other photograph used, are of Taksim square, the view of the golden horn, a photo that depicts a man with no legs among many others. Though many photographs have a wide range of purposes from Pamuk's memoirs, there seems to be a clear sense of reason for these specific selections of photographs. There is no discrimination for which photographs Pamuk chooses as evidence; each account of melancholy, of *hüzün*, has the same brief description. Their purpose in this passage is for evidence, to strengthen Pamuk's descriptions and record what melancholy can be seen in Istanbul.

Still, as Pamuk uses these photographs to detail his memories of the *hüzün* of Istanbul, there are times when the photographs hold a more personal value to the author. Deviating from the use of photographs in *Istanbul* as evidence, there are passages and photographs to support that Pamuk finds, as Roland Barthes, describes, "Punctum" in some photographs. Roland Barthes illustrates in his writings, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* that photographs can draw the attention of a viewer; a small detail will punctuate the photograph, and one may find a photograph which can undeniably be tempting to the viewer. *Punctum* is a different interpretation of photography than evidence, where the viewer finds a photograph aesthetically pleasing in a personal way, as opposed to the previous use for documentation.

Early in the book, Pamuk discusses in his writings of the aesthetics of Istanbulis, he finds one photograph, taken by Ara Güler, of an unknown couple, walking down a twilight lit road, between wooden and concrete buildings. For Pamuk, this picture depicts what a normal road in Istanbul would look like, with its eroded walls and rundown streets. Unlike other photographs, Pamuk finds this twilight photograph more appealing and spends time dwelling on its details. In it, he finds *hüzün* falling over Istanbul. The couple is silhouetted by a single street lamp, which covers them in darkness and casts a long shadow along the cobbled road. The shadow, as he continues contemplating the

photograph, stimulates him to imagine that the couple is pulling the night along with them as they walk down the street. As Barthes would explain, Pamuk is describing the *punctum* of the photograph. Here, the photograph is no longer a documentation of evidence, nor is it just an aid for Pamuk's memory. After examining it, he discovers a detail that makes him have his own interpretation of the place during that hour. It allows Pamuk to see the photograph as how he feels about the *hüzün* that looms large on the city.

Images, drawings and photos help Pamuk to juxtapose another form of media with the text in order to reveal the complexities of memory, loss, trauma and space in relation to geo-political, aesthetic, and identity issues. The influence and power of the printed images in the text creates a 'heterotopia' to understand the history of people and the place from different perspectives.

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