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'Taking the children: Some reflections at a distance on the camera and Dr Barnardo'

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Preamble

My focus of attention is a collection of photographs taken in the last quarter of the 19th century for Dr Barnardo, founder of the well-known British institutions for orphans and street children. In particular I examine, as political texts, the individual portraits of the children he 'rescued' from street middens. A paradigmatic case is looked at in some detail, a photograph taken by Thomas Barnes or Roderick Johnstone on 5th January 1883 of a young girl called Sarah Burgess.

Realism and the politics of representation

Today it's practically a commonplace that photographs are political. Side by side with a reconsideration of the photograph as a form of semiosis, and despite the master's own reaffirmation of his lifelong devotion to 'realism', note1 almost no-one today claims that photography is a mere window on the world, a neutral mechanism for snapping reality within a four-sided, two-dimensional frame. This shift in epistemic ground is, apparently, the basis for its politicisation. If the real is not available, so the story goes, what must move into the grounds it once occupied is something called 'the political'. But why? How does a political category simply come to replace an epistemic one? Are they not different quanta entirely? For it remains true that not only families, historians, business corporations and so on, but also philosophers and critical photo-analysts themselves, continue to cite and reproduce photographs in order to refer to or make visible not just the texts of those photographs but also what those texts ostensibly show, their objects.

The relation between a photograph and its object, then, continues to be problematic in ways that generalised semiotic references to 'the political' cannot easily solve. The most dogmatic relativist will not say that a Polaroid I take of him is not him but, for example, someone else. In removing all possibility and consideration of a realist problematic, we run the risk of embracing a kind if naive and uncritical relativism. But instead we could begin to ask what a strategy for bringing off a piecemeal political analysis of photographs -- including the politics of the referent -- would look like. This would have its own risks: for to subvert realism we would first have to install it; to contest it we would first have to inscribe it. This strategy would acknowledge that there is no pure challenge without some incorporation of the discourse(s) being challenged.

What we would need to ask is: in what specific ways are photographs political? And depending utterly on the particular circumstance, this may or may not lead to asking how their relations with their objects play a part in those specific ways. To ask the text-object question in this way also opens up the possibility of
multiple relations between photographs and their others: one which does not especially privilege the referent or object as a specifically central other, even by negation. To disclose what some of these other political others can be is the point of this paper. In particular I look at relations between the text and its historical locus of production, at its concrete and practical uses as a form of communication between the institution which produced it and other institutions and, finally, at its generic position in terms of current modes of pictorial consumption.

**Institutional/technical locus of production**

Semiotic analysis, by and large, treats the sign (for example the photographic image) synchronically. What this neglects is the ways in which a photograph can carry, either explicitly or implicitly, the traces of its initial historical locus of production. To say this is not to privilege an historical 'origin' as the categorical meaning of the picture: rather it is to remember, in Nietzsche's sense, a sense in which history is put at the service of a critical philosophy of the present rather than celebrated as an ultimate and fixed point of reference. note2

When Sarah Burgess had her photograph taken by a relatively new process in which half-tone blocks could be made cheaply and reproduced en masse in the form of albumen prints, she and her image were caught up in a whole range of quite new institutional and technical apparatuses. note3 This type of writing, the easily disseminable photo-graph, now made a new phenomenon available for mass consumption: the ordinary person. It is then, effectively, from the 1880s that members of mass populations could consume one another as images; from then that they could have an image of themselves. This possibility, especially as it coincides with the extension of the franchise, the introduction of mass schooling, major developments in sanitation, welfare, housing and working conditions, sounds emancipatory. note4

However, the new ready availability of the cheap snap meant new loci of institutional control surrounding both the distribution of photographic equipment (the popular Kodak camera for example) as well as its products. As Noel Sanders has argued, when Victorian families began to take and distribute their 'own' portraits at this time, it was more often than not a woman who posed, along with some simple props, and a man (father/husband) who hid under the black cloth to snap her. note5 Either this, or one went to a photographic gallery where a woman and/or her family were also subject to a photographic practice controlled by men. At a time of Empire and colonisation, men could send back to their families at home likenesses of their possessions, including wives and children. In an old photograph I have in my postcard collection, a group of women pose within a boxing-ring-like enclosure. A sign distinguishing them and 'their' technology, is pinned to the ropes, reading 'EUROPEAN LADIES'. Popular photography was, then, a European and masculine form of representation and what it did was to capture women. Even when men were photographed, they were thereby at least partly feminised: as Sanders shows, they 'camped it up' in front of the camera, coming to be scrutinised for the first time the way women always have been. This began to map out a series of relations of control of and by the photograph in general. And a similar notion appears to have been entertained by Wittgenstein in a characteristically materialist moment: 'The human body', he wrote, 'is the best picture of the human soul'. note6 The politics of photography might consist of the initial question: who is taken by whom with what?

What we know of the Barnardo photographs suggests an entirely typical set of 19th century pictorial relations. Barnardo does not take the photographs himself. His work is cut out in more overtly practical tasks than that of mere representation which always carries with it the connotation of pleasure. That work is, therefore, passed on to a particular agent within the institutional division of labour. However, Barnardo is nevertheless the one who literally captures the subjects, the children. According to his own rather romantic reconstruction of the Homes’ origins, the Irish missionary in training, T.J. Barnardo, was taken one night in the late 60s, by one of the London 'street Arabs' he taught, to a 'lay' where boys slept in bundles beside a rotting wharf. It was 'a spectacle to angels and to men enough to break any heart of love', as he later put it. note7
Barnardo began, literally, to collect these boys, these 'Arabs' who were utterly and completely other to him and to the charitable middle classes of the time. The discourses which pervade Barnardo's accounts construct this radical otherness as if the children were another race or even species, one to be both helped on its way and scientifically understood in the manner of 19th century evolutionary biology and colonialist ethnology. Barnardo had wanted to go as a missionary to China. Now the oriental other was available to him practically on his own doorstep, no further east than the East End of London.

To convince official political sources that there even existed a 'problem', Barnardo was forced, again according to his own account, to lead Lord Shaftesbury himself to a lay, 'Queen's Shades' near Billingsgate. As the official photo-catalogue accounts puts it:

> There he found the largest 'lay' he was ever to see: seventy-three boys came stumbling out from under a huge tarpaulin, shivering in the bitter night air. With the powerful support of Lord Shaftesbury and his friends his deep longing to help destitute children came a step nearer fulfilment. note8

The key to this early success (whose modern counterpart is no doubt the fact that Barnardo's is the favourite charity of Diana, Princess of Wales) was a decisive empirical victory: a demonstration. Shaftesbury literally saw the problem with his own eyes. Barnardo's mission, as much as it was to run destitute children to ground as a kind of specimen collection, was to have as many people as possible undergo Shaftesbury's and his own empirical, visual, experience of those specimens. And hence the utterly crucial role of photography for Barnardo.

Photography, however, was only one (though perhaps the most singularly effective one) of a battery of writing forms Barnardo had available. His own sermons and speeches were legendary in their ability to move audiences to give. His technique is the prototype of the monetary evangelist in this respect. But closest to his conception of himself as the central organiser of orphan charities in Britain -- with a literally massive export business to the colonies of Canada and Australia note9 -- was the practice of keeping official records. As we shall see, photography was a technique which could span both sides of this double strategy. It could both illustrate sermons and lectures and other public appeals as well as bolster Barnardo's claim to keep meticulous internal records. On the latter score, Barnardo became an obsessive record keeper, perhaps since the more traditionally philanthropic Charity Organization Society had accused him publicly of not being 'scientific'. His journal *Day and Night* was subtitled 'A monthly record of Christian missions and practical philanthropy'. This monthly record was, in itself, a doubly useful tool: it took toll of the problem he faced as a quantitative empirical phenomenon and it also recorded his success at controlling it. It was both spectacular and demographic. That is, keeping records in this kind of detail -- with a portrait photograph the dominant part of each personal history -- meant that Barnardo's edge over competing institutions could be publicly visible in documentary form while, at the same time, it also worked internally to the nascent organisation itself as a mode of regimenting, ranking and categorising the vast and disparate array of young people brought in during the weekly culls. In this way they could be most efficiently routed and deployed in large numbers through the various quasi-domestic and labour departments of Barnardo's: from the Babies' Castle and the Tinies' Home to the Weaving and Tailors' Shops and the Wood Chopping Brigade. As noted, central to this record-keeping was the photograph: a means with a double end. It recorded each child's unique features at the same time that it homogenised the children as a whole, making them Barnardo boys and girls.

1874 saw the establishment of a specific department at Barnardo's for photographic records of this kind. Initially a photographer with a shop close to Barnardo's in Mile End Road, Thomas Barnes, was employed to run the department. His approach is an interesting one generically, since his subjects largely fill the frame of the photograph and are often posed with props such as tables and chairs clearly visible. In this sense they have all the characteristics of Victorian portraiture: technical masculine dominance of the apparatus on behalf of an institution and its interests, feminised and romanticised subjects acting compliantly and complicitly in their own representational subjection. On the other hand, the pictures can
be stark, especially from the point at which Roderick Johnstone took over the section, possibly as early as 1883. From 1885 onwards, at least, the portraits exude less pleasure; they become more technical and institutional and they begin to have names and dates etched on to their surfaces. The 'homely' props are more Spartan from this point. It is as if the mode of publicity were giving way to the mode of bureaucracy. Sarah Burgess appears to be caught right in the middle of this barely perceptible generic switch. She is at once a person and a part of an institutional record. We can equally imagine her both illustrating a lecture and glued into a clinical case folder.

In this respect, as both Tagg and Wagner & Lloyd have noticed, there is a growing influence at Barnardo's of the seminal work of Hugh Diamond, psychiatrist, superintendent of the Female Department of the Surrey County Lunatic Asylum and also the founder of the Royal Photographic Society. The conjuncture is an interesting and even disturbing one; for Diamond's will to photograph is predicated upon his Galtonian theory of insane types and a corresponding eugenicist paranoia over the protection of the English population from their spread. Photographic evidence, he believed, could prove the existence of these contaminating types and from this impulse emerges the 'mug shot' in both mental hospital and police station. One could speculate on whether Barnardo had a similar typological interest in street children and some corresponding theory of their proper treatment and management.

It is nevertheless the case that the Burgess photograph was taken during a medial period. Occasional police photographs were taken then, but the London police had no photography department of their own until as late as 1901 and what would seem to be a model for Barnardo, the passport photograph, did not in fact emerge until another 13 years after that with the outbreak of WWI. In this sense, the Barnes-Johnstone jobs at Barnardo's took as much a part in developing the generic categories as they did in following them. That is, they almost precisely capture the double function of their institution.

It was a 'home' and so substituted for the families of the children it took in. Like the bourgeois family of the time, on which it was modelled in spirit if not materially, it was a site of portraiture. Photographic portraiture was a way of keeping its history as a family, a kind of practical genealogical record, a line of descent. It was a means of creating ancestors for those yet to come as Barnardo boys and girls. Barnardo kept his photographs in albums and they were available for inspection as in any family. At the same time, Barnardo's was also a growing welfare agency with a function utterly different from the family. It had an emergent bureaucratic problem of keeping records and accounts of its activities, of inscribing its own raison d'être in an increasingly functionalist public world. Thus the photographs were pasted on to Personal Histories which noted age, height, hair and eye colours, complexion, bodily marks and vaccination points as well as date of admission and attendance at Reformatory or Industrial School. In this second sense, then, the photographs were a technical form of writing, severed from the interest and pleasure of the familial gaze, and closer to the genre of hospital and police records.

The photographs work in two ways: they give these children who are severed from the institution of the family real biographies in terms of an alternative institutional structure; they also take any identity they may have had outside the confines of Barnardo's, merging them into a common ID. A double use of the photographs corresponds to these joint techniques of individualisation and normalisation.

Uses of the text: surveillance and advertising

It's hard to imagine, looking at Sarah Burgess, that some unique individual was not being treated and cared for in an utterly personal way, at the moment this photograph was taken, in the way the bourgeois father was then supposed to care in loving detail for his daughter. A narrative of this kind would almost fit the picture but for some details: the clothes for example and the wild hair. And in one sense this is exactly the effect that photographs such as this were supposed to have strategically -- just as today we can send our charitable donations to aid a particular named child or family like but also unlike ourselves. But as with today's charities, we know that in all probability there is a vast official network operating and that the personalist approach, to both subscriber and on behalf of the apparent recipient, is another (quite legitimate) mode of sale. The personal charity picture is, in this sense, no more and no less personal than

http://wwwmcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/5.1/Barnardo.html[18/07/2012 3:03:14 PM]
the group of 'friends' on the beach in a cigarette commercial. But what is important is the effect or function of the 'real person'.

Against that uniqueness, indeed beauty, of Sarah Burgess is a stark fact. Between 1874 and 1905, the Barnardo photography department took over 55,000 photographs. As Wagner & Lloyd put it, the photographs were 'mostly taken systematically when the children were admitted'. One barely needs the vast Foucauldian historical-critical apparatus which Tagg, for example, brings to bear on these matters and which writers such as Donald have followed up in terms of the great educational and welfare changes which swept through Europe in the last two decades of the 19th century. Suddenly the ordinary person was visible as more than a constituent of a mass. She or he had connections with macro-institutions where names, numbers and histories were inscribed. History, of a kind, became available outside the commission of outrageous acts. Public records began to count heads rather than hearths, and while many a humanist critic saw this as the period in which people became mere ciphers, it is often forgotten that it is also precisely the time that they became anything at all. Beforehand they had not even been this distinct in anyone's terms but their own. A number in a particular institutional locale is unique, and it is also part of a system of numbering and accounting. But it is still unique. To normalise and homogenise, in this specific late 19th century sense, is to individualise and personalise. There is no technical paradox here. And this we can take to be one of the main discoveries of such seminal works as Discipline and Punish.

However, Foucauldians such as Tagg tend very strongly towards one side in this matter. Both Tagg and Donald quote Barnardo, through Wagner & Lloyd, to the effect that the photographic record had a central and dominant surveillance function. It apparently existed:

To make the recognition easy of boys and girls guilty of criminal acts, such as theft, burglary or arson, and who may, under false pretences, gain admission to our Homes. Many such instances have occurred in which the possession of these photographs has enabled us to communicate with the police, or with former employees, and thus led to the discovery of offenders. By means of these likenesses children absconding from our Homes are often recovered and brought back, and in not a few instances, juveniles who have been stolen from their parents or guardians or were tempted by evil companions to leave home, and at last, after wandering for a while on the streets, found their way to our Institution, have been recognized by parents or friends and finally restored to their

The point, clearly, can be taken, and I would want to be the last to deny either the general or the specific policing functionality of the Barnardo photographs. Their sheer number, their generic connections, their material uses in connected bureaucratic practices of control all speak too loudly against any other interpretation. But isn't the Barnardo text a rather peculiar speech act? Why does he seem to protest too much -- to lay on very thickly and openly the meshings between his photographic practices and the official authorities of law and order? Is he perhaps writing a kind of defence here? Has some accusation been made as to the propriety of Barnardo's interest in photographing so many young people in such detail?

The obvious Freudian possibilities should be quickly mentioned. For example the penultimate figure in the official Barnardo exhibition catalogue is from as late as 1892. It shows double image of a teenage girl, naked but for her knee-length stockings, garters and leather boots. A cloak is draped across her left shoulder, but the picture is taken from her right. The two pictures are a 'before' and an 'after' shot. What the photographs show, however, is not the improving effect of some treatment for her physical deformity, but rather how the photographer's art can cover it up. The catalogue caption reads:

Two photographs taken at the same time in 1892 showing a girl with severe lordosis. The one on the left showing the worst aspect, and the other disguising the symptoms almost completely by careful arrangement of the girl and her cloak.
The arrangement of the figure as a means of making the white flesh against the black cloak more appealing to a viewer, as well as the other details, cannot but remind one of pornography. Could this be the kind of problem which Wagner and Lloyd refer to guardedly as 'unpleasant rumours' about Barnardo? Why was this photograph taken, then? Why show up how the camera can lie by turning a cripple into a more 'normal' object for the male sexual gaze? The answer has, perhaps, rather more to do with the micro-politics of advertising's very careful attitude towards naturalistic representation and other realist practices than it has to do with psychoanalytic speculations about the repression the reality principle.

Barnardo was charged with a number of counts of misconduct in the late 1870s. A Baptist Minister accused him, in blunt terms, of faking his records. He wrote:

The system of taking, and making capital of, the children's photographs is not only dishonest, but has a tendency to destroy the better feelings of the children. Barnardo's method is to take the children as they are supposed to enter the Home, and then after they have been in the Home some time. He is not satisfied with taking them as they really are, but he tears their clothes, so as to make them appear worse than they really are. They are also taken in purely fictitious positions. A lad named Fletcher is taken with a shoeblack's box upon his back, although he never was a shoeblack....

Gillian Wagner has Barnardo 'fully acquitted ... on the gravest of the original charges' (p.5), while Valerie Lloyd notes a change in photographic methods 'after the Arbitration Court had ruled against Barnardo on one of the published photographs as being "artistic fiction"' (p.14). Henceforth, a more strictly documentary type of photograph took over, in any case -- though this was never a thorough change as the lordosis example shows, and Barnardo's photography department appears to have had a continued interest in the manipulation of its subject matter 'to aid in advocating the claims of [the] Institution'.

Barnardo's impulse, especially in the 70s, seemed to have been very closely tied to such matters of publicity. He used his then-dominant 'before and after' mode of picture-taking to raise subscriptions. His problem was to turn every potential subscriber, no matter how poor and uninfluential, into a Lord Shaftesbury. He had to lead them to 'lays' ('before') and show them the improvements their subscriptions were buying ('after'). The model of cause and effect, disease and diagnosis, means and ends is a classic 19th century one. This was the available discourse on proof. It furnished truth.

But the photographs played a different (though related) role vis-a-vis the subscribers. As the British sociologist, John Lee, has argued, acts of charity confer upon the donor certain rights and privileges with respect to the recipient. Lee cites an example from the late Harvey Sacks who, at a workshop in Manchester in the 1970s, analysed the following example. A man had given an old coat to a boy begging in the street and later offered the following remark to a friend in casual conversation, 'I gave this young lad a coat and you know he was so grateful that he wore it all the time, day and night -- I wouldn't be surprised if he wore it to bed'. In this sense, the material object, the coat, is 'exchanged' for rights to ascribe to the recipient what that recipient can normally only avow on his own behalf ("I was so grateful..."). It could be seen, perhaps, as conferring a formal right to condescend. Or, more strictly, it should be seen as the right to represent the recipient. Barnardo's problem, as the organiser of one of the first mass charities, and therefore as 'mediator' between a large population of recipients and an even larger population of donors, was simply this: how to deliver to donors their traditional rights of representation? The technology of the photograph, its 'realism' and its mass reproducibility, as a highly literal form of representation, solved the problem. Subscribers were sent, in return for their monetary donations, picture-cards showing the recipients either in the streets and/or in better conditions following their 'rescue'. These could, in turn, be shown to friends as evidence of good work done. They are the pictorial equivalent of utterances like 'he was so grateful...': and, in a very literal sense, can be taken as techniques for allowing donors to represent recipients.

At this time in Britain, three types of photograph circulated on cards, often collected in decks or, with the obvious exception, mailed through the new Penny Postal System as the recto of that correspondingly new
generic form, the postcard. note23 The three forms were: family portraits, pornographic poses and Barnardo-type charity photographs. The subscriber's investment in the corresponding spheres of semi-private familial interest, the forbidden-private-become-public and the overt sphere of public welfare was measured by the amounts spent on the cards. Barnardo's East End Juvenile Mission put out sets of paired cards. The first of the pair would show a boy in rags, supposedly as he was discovered on the streets. The second would show him spruced up in gainful labour: 'Once a little vagrant', 'Now a little workman'. But as the official catalogue has it: 'in fact the two pictures were taken on the same day'. note24 The cards' versos carried an emotional message to subscribers but one which also played, no doubt, on their scopophilic curiosities:

> These Photographs are sent forth at the request of many kind friends, who had already obtained one or two single copies in a more private manner, but desiring a collection of them, suggested the publication of the present series. We earnestly hope that the view of the bright, or, it may be, the sad faces of our young proteges will lead the friends who purchase the Photographs to sympathize very truly with us in our happy but sometimes deeply trying labours. note25

The cards, then, positioned themselves directly in between the other two popular forms of photograph-card. Barnardo had calculated the limits of transgression with precision. note26 From pornography they took the desire to collect representations of the experience of the 'other' in a way which makes that curiosity appear natural and even wholesome. From the family portrait they took the notion of direct personal interest in some, albeit extended, kin: a specifically kinless kin joined to the viewer through some new humanistic notion that becomes 'the family of man' -- a frequent topic of photograph collections and exhibitions since the turn of the century.

Barnardo's art was, specifically, this well-calculated form of sale and his need for funds appears to have been quite a desperate one. Not only were Baptist Ministers and the Charity Organisation Society breathing down his neck, perhaps because of his cornering of the 'good works' market, but a whole range of quite powerful and influential counter-charities were competing directly for his funds. He had no choice, effectively, than to go for what was seen by his more conservative peers and competitors as more lurid methods, targeted much further down the market than the traditional philanthropists. The risk, of course, was to have one's motives questioned.

This is why, I suggest, Barnardo in the passage cited above and routinely quoted as evidence of his purely panoptic interest in photography, comes on so strongly as a conservative authority figure. His problem was, indeed, one of retaining his moral respectability in the midst of rumours about his almost scandalous quantitative success, both with the children and in his methods of attracting capital. It is with Barnardo that the capitalised base of charity moves away from a few rich philanthropists towards a mass base of widow's mites which count for very little in themselves but amount to a great deal when calculated in terms of economies of scale. And this is itself a pre-utilisation of the methods which would eventually emerge in 20th consumer capitalism. While the classical capitalism that Barnardo grew up with made its profits from monopolising major life-necessities, the later consumer capitalism realised there were greater hedges against falling rates of profit to be had from the conviction industry -- from selling images of what was available rather than simply from selling what was manifestly needed, image or no image. In this sense, consumer capitalism created its own needs and markets rather than simply plugging into and satisfying pre-existing ones. Barnardo sold non-material goods along the same lines: he sold moral righteousness on the same broad canvas to those who previously could not afford it. His was perhaps the firstly genuinely 'people's' charity. Those who had so suddenly acquired personal identities now felt, with Barnardo's skilful prompting, that they should provide financially for this possibility to be extended to all the newly emergent 'humanity' of which they now felt themselves a part. The new secular 'sin' was anonymity. The photograph marked two points in this: the point of public conviction (the advertising cards) and the point of its fulfilment (the 'familisation' and 'deanonymisation' of orphans through the internal 'Home' portrait).
'Realism' could then, after this long detour, perhaps be the term which is applied to such neat and tidy closings of moral-political circles: it is the double philosophy of representation which both compels a particular reading and also proves the compulsion to be empirically warranted, in one and the same move. This is why it is so dangerously effective and why neither philosophers nor photo-analysts can easily confine its ingrained presence to the convenient oubliette of naive relativism.

**Sarah Burgess today**

Can we possibly know what photography meant in the 19th century? Perhaps we can only arrive at the barest outline. At least, it is a paradox that what seems to us the very signifier of age, the sepia photograph, was, in its own day, the very picture of modern technology. Thus it carried with it a notion almost of vulgarity, mechanicalness and anti-art barely reserved these days even for laser images and computer simulations. Writing of childhood in the period Barnardo was at work, Proust makes it clear that his main character, Marcel's, provincial bourgeois family held photography in high contempt. His grandmother, for example:

...would have liked me to have in my room photographs of the finest buildings and most beautiful landscapes. But when it came to the actual business of buying a photograph, even though she recognized that the subject of it retained its aesthetic value, she would think of the mechanical process by which the picture had been produced and was instantly put off by the vulgarity and uselessness of photography. note27

The 'uselessness', of course, was all moral. Sarah Burgess was not only to be saved from the pitiable state of the streets of London but also from treatment in this sordid way. The distribution of Barnardo's charity advertisements in the form of photographs was, therefore, a shrewd move. To bourgeois and aspiring-bourgeois tastes of the times, it added a whole dimension to the recoverable vulgarity of 'street Arabs'.

What seemed to shock much less, in those days -- and hence its use as a means of appealing to educated, refined and less manifestly prurient tastes -- was the much older technology of the lantern slide show. It retained, interestingly, the connotations of art and magic and notions of being a fit medium for visual education and the reproduction of great paintings. Thus Marcel's family have no such doubts about allowing him access to this technology as they do about photographs. His magic lantern 'fitted over the top of the lamp' in the young Marcel's room. It was a fixture, part of the fabric, more like a TV than a photo album in its presence.

After the manner of the first Gothic architects and master glass-artists, it turned my opaque walls into intangible rainbows and preternatural images in all sorts of colours, depicting old legends in a sort of tremulous and transitory stained-glass window. note28

The lantern figures in Marcel's childhood, therefore, resemble much more the windows of the local church (pp.46-47) than they do the new-fangled X-ray pictures which barely anyone understands (p.41).

Barnardo was not slow to recognise all this: especially that to be respectable meant bringing pictures as directly as possible to the subscribers without allowing the interpretation that they might have ignoble interests -- so far and no further. All the better then, if these could be reinforced by the real presence of an informed and knowledgeable voice, preferably Barnardo's own. Thus the Photographic Department at Barnardo's became, by at least 1890, the 'Photography and Lantern Slide Department' note29 and Barnardo, as it were, began to slip back into the older, more respectable, logocentric and luce-centric mode of the illustrated slide lecture. At this time, to quote Wagner & Lloyd: 'sequences of slides with moral themes were sold in great numbers to a public enthusiastic for almost any kind of knowledge'. note30 To maintain correct and standard commentaries, the wardens of Barnardo's Young Helpers' League also roamed throughout Britain, drumming up subscriptions with slide-based lectures.

What this shows is something unique to the way in which the 19th century viewed the photographic trace.
While its subject, as Marcel's ur-Benjaminite grandmother knew, preserved its aesthetic dimensions in the photograph, what was lacking from the print form was not only colour but also light. The photograph counted as an almost naturalistic representation, then, complete but for its stubborn opacity to light. It was poor pigment, not quality luminescence -- more on the side of the plain printed text than of the oil painting. One could not see through to its proper subject and this, by contrast with the well-known lantern slide, always reminded 19th century viewers of its technical aspects -- though no doubt there were others who thought this kind of Verfremdung technique manque to be a virtue.

All of this remains entirely foreign for us today. On the contrary, we see a series of paradoxes in the photograph of Sarah Burgess: a young girl in an old picture; someone long dead illustrating an appeal for children with their lives still ahead of them; a street urchin in ragged clothes who remains picturesque who, these days, would have to be costumed to look this way as if for a scene in a Dickensian stage musical. The paradoxes are, almost literally, matters of life and death. This is what we see in all sufficiently old photographs. It is the same impulse, perhaps, which makes photographic and video representations of the dead complex and problematic issues in some Aboriginal cultures. note31

Writing of this same set of relations between temporal distance, death and representation, Roland Barthes raises the case of Alexander Gardner's photograph of the condemned boy, Lewis Payne, who attempted to assassinate the US Secretary of State almost 20 years before the Sarah Burgess photograph: '... the punctum is: he is going to die. I read at the same time: This will be and this has been.... What pricks me is the discovery of an equivalence'. Then, turning to the image he most wants to understand

in front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder ... over a catastrophe which has already occurred. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe. note32

In Sarah Burgess, we see a 'rescue' or a 'capture' which has already occurred. She has been taken, from the street. The photograph, by its very existence, means this. But she also stands synechdochally for all those who never were, for the eternally unknowable-because-unrecuperated others. She reminds us of the oblivion of unwritten history, of our deepest reason for writing and being written and, at the same time, of its failures. And she too is dead. Her presence for us continually fades and returns, depending on how we look. There she is, at one moment, in black and white, her photograph infinitely more important than herself. It has now passed into the genre of late 20th century disposable bourgeois art. Recherche bookshops from Covent Garden to Fremantle sell postcards of Sarah Burgess alongside designer gift-wrap and hardbound copies of The Rustle of Language. She is reproduced in 'art' catalogues as well as in academic studies of photography and portraiture. She appears in Screen Education and, now, in Continuum. She lapses over into being identified with the late 1980s trend for teenage girl models.

But amid this vitality, life, future and hope in the apparent enonce, the enonciation always returns this infant to death. The dark, determined but still forlorn eyes stare out from a corpse as much as from a living girl. The chiaroscuro effect of the black and white is almost sinister and recalls, for us, the cliches of film noir. This is Barthes' 'catastrophe'. We want to ask: 'who is she?' -- but the question is always blocked by: 'she is dead, where did she go?'

This double, which now takes over the print from the equally but differently realist doubles of its 19th century loci, is a paradox, a puzzle. What has become a black-and-white art photograph keeps disappearing as we view it and turning into something else: something lost and gone which postmodern discourse can barely grasp at since its stance towards history is, at worst, nostalgic and, at best, parodic. This something else is the historical other which inhabits the frame upon a certain kind of viewing. We can glimpse it only occasionally through the opaque surface of the print, but it insists -- precisely as a discursive effect and in no other way -- on having its subliminal presence. For us the text of the photograph has at least two others then: one dominant and the other marginalised. The first connects with 'art' and the retrospective romanticisation of poverty. The second is the lingering doubt and possibility of a real empirical person who never figured anywhere but here, Sarah Burgess. The first suggests always what
Brecht continually condemned as 'tui'; the second the utterly unobtainable. However a contemporary viewer looks at this picture, it will keep slipping away into meaninglessness. We can barely make an interpretation of it. The most common reaction is that it shows and says nothing special. And this is achieved, perhaps, through the mutual cancellation of its two others, the almost total embrace of 'tui' art and the near-impossibility of authentic history. The punctum, here, as it were, is not 'she is dead' but 'how can she be dead?'

This points to a set of limits, a crisis for contemporary realism: for it demands two incommensurate readings of at least some pictures. Firstly there is a kind of technical ethnological realism through which the shot of Sarah Burgess can begin to unfold a case history, for example. What this realism sees is an as-yet-alive Sarah Burgess -- magic realism! -- located in a particular time and space which are the objects of its inquiry. It is a realism parallel to that of the ethnographic film or the nature documentary. For it, the photograph acts as evidence for a particular conjuncture of 'human life', just as much as the historical evidence around it 'situates' the photo-text.

But then there is a further realism, as we have seen; a kind of 'facing of facts' whereby the monochrome sepia trace speaks of everything but Sarah Burgess's presence. Realism produces both 'it is' and a contradictory 'it was'. And this is crucial to our understanding of its political effect, the effect which expunges the very temporal contradiction on which it rests. 'Realistically' a photograph can never be timeless or universal yet realism always perversely demands that it be read that way. However philosophers may use the term 'realism', the practice of realism as a form of pictorial production and consumption collects up the contradictory double of the fleeting empirical moment in all its particularity along with notions of timeless essence. Somehow -- and this is still the mystery of it -- the two are supposed to co-exist. And so realism, along with many a mystical discourse, can only say one thing in practice: accept ... ask no questions ... assimilate the text to the overwhelmingly ordinary, the stream of quotidian affairs as you find them. Realism is quietism. Perhaps this should be its acknowledged position in our studies of photographic images. Yet the debate on realism is shaping in quite other directions at present.

Eagleton, for example, with his own kind of nostalgia, wants to know what happened to 'the referent or real historical world'. Huyssen, less wistfully, condemns the postmodern relativist idea that 'history does not exist except as text'. And Hutcheon defends that stance by saying:

... within a positivist frame of reference, photographs could be accepted as neutral representations, as windows on the world. In ... postmodernist photos ... they still represent (for they cannot avoid reference), but what they represent is self-consciously shown to be highly filtered by the discursive and aesthetic assumptions of the camera holder.

Neither side of the debate has much news for traditional or contemporary realism, nothing that cannot be incorporated. Eagleton's nostalgia for the firm and solid 'real historical world' is something realism recovered from almost as soon as it became modern (let alone postmodern). And, on the other side, the idea that images are 'filtered' by discourse and aesthetics is entirely compatible with realist readings of technology and human psychology. It can all be too easily accounted for within the very discourse which is being contested and this state of affairs suggests that political investigations of the image still have some way to go.

Unlike certain versions of postmodernism, I would want to retain realism: but precisely as an analysed rather than an analytic category. Realism requires at least some kind of archaeological treatment. As we have seen, its paradoxical reading effects have changed their valencies in the last century of photography, but they still remain no less strong and active as modes of producing and consuming pictures. Just as author functions will not simply vanish by theoretical fiat upon the announcement of the author's death by avant-garde criticism, so neither will practical realist forms of interpretation. This is especially so with regard to the photo-text's multiple others, the multiple and even contradictory 'reals' with which we often cannot help but read it.
Notes


9. Wagner and Lloyd report that by 1905 Barnardo's had 8,000 children in Homes, 4,000 boarded out and had sent 18,000 to Canada and Australia. *C&DB*, p.6.


12. See Tagg, 'Power and Photography' and Donald, 'Beacons of the Future'.


18. Indeed, there were a number of charges laid against Barnardo during the late 1870s. Among these were that he ran his charity for personal monetary advantage; that he consorted with women of dubious moral virtue (the 'Mrs Johnson' affair); that he was not legally entitled to call himself 'Doctor' and had forged an
entitling letter from the University of Giessen (though he was later admitted as an FRCS in 1879); that he was the author of the 'Clerical Junius' letters criticising George Reynolds and Frederick Charrington, Barnardo's main critics; that he used faked photographs to 'prove' the effectiveness of his work; that his missions extended to both the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving' poor and thus encouraged mendicancy and subverted the Poor Laws; that he was guilty of cruelty and neglect towards the children in his homes. The nearest I have been able to get to the sordid detail is chapters 8 and 9 of Gillian Wagner, *Barnardo* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1979), pp.121-155.


21. John Lee, personal communication. John offered these comments to me following a presentation of an earlier form of this paper at the University of Manchester in September 1989. It is my intention to follow these remarks through, in a joint project with him, towards a more detailed sociology of charity.

22. I should register here the slight misgivings I have about this double use of the term 'represent' to mean both 'speak on behalf of' and 'depict'. This whole question needs to be unpacked as a research project in its own right. Again, John Lee has acted as my analytic conscience here.


30. C&DB, p.16.


33. Terry Eagleton, 'Capitalism, Modernism and