

A Dialectical Image

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Robert Capa's photograph is a retort to Stalin. Trotsky's image, with the former leader of the Red Army caught in full flow and documented before an audience of two thousand, appeared within days in *Der Welt-Spiegel*, on December 11, 1932. It is documentary proof: Trotsky lives and Trotsky agitates. Against Stalin's policy of building Socialism in one country, Trotsky, the internationalist stranded in exile, lives to explain the revolution that has been—and of which he was a part—and to argue for the revolution yet to come. Monitoring developments in the Soviet Union, Trotsky was sensitized to how control of archives, including photographic ones, underprops those who rule. In October 1927, he wrote about the susceptibility of documentation to manipulation, for he personally had been too often airbrushed out. He reflected too on how awareness of the stream of events plays through images. In some notebooks written between 1933 and 1934, in France, Trotsky wrestles with how a photograph might provide a model for understanding consciousness and how it might reveal the direction of history, a hope mobilized when scrutinizing snapshots of Lenin, which he carried with him and wanted to use as prompts for a biography.

Dialectical interplays suffuse Trotsky's writings: subject cleaves to object, conscious to unconscious, theory to practice. In 1930, his autobiography, *My Life*, reflected on his selfhood formed within history. Just after, in 1931 and 1932, he published an historical account of the Russian Revolution, in which he refers to himself in the third person as "Trotsky." The single-page photo story that used Capa's image is captioned with quotes from Trotsky's *My Life*. The one next to this photograph concerns the relationship of Marxism's conscious expression to the unconscious historical process. It evokes "inspiration" in which subject and object, conscious and unconscious, collapse into each other and the Revolution is the inspired frenzy of history:

[E]very real orator experiences moments when some one stronger than the self of his every-day existence speaks through him. This is "inspiration." It derives from the highest creative effort of all one's forces. The unconscious rises from its deep well and bends the conscious mind to its will, merging it with itself in some greater synthesis.¹

Here in the photograph is Trotsky, his arms elevated, frozen photographically into the stance of one who experiences a powerful force shooting through him and speaking out of him. In the speech he is delivering here, he talks about future humans.

Psycho-analysis, with the inspired hand of Sigmund Freud, has lifted the cover of the well which is poetically called the "soul." And what has been revealed? Our conscious thought is only a small part of the work of the dark psychic forces. Learned divers descend to the bottom of the ocean and there take photographs of mysterious fishes. Human thought, descending to the bottom of its own psychic sources, must shed light on the most mysterious driving forces of the soul and subject them to reason and to will.²

The innermost recesses of the subject need bringing to light, made object for us. We are our own object. We can be better than what we are. Trotsky saw worse and something else came to light. He likely did not see the assassin who used an ice pick to make a cocktail of his brain in 1940.

1 Leon Trotsky, *My Life: An Attempt at an Autobiography* (New York: Dover, 2007), 334-35.

2 Leon Trotsky, "The Future of Man," concluding remarks of the Speech on the Russian Revolution delivered in Copenhagen, November 1932, reprinted in *Fourth International* 8.7 (July-Aug. 1947), 223.



Robert Capa

Leon Trotsky lecturing, Copenhagen, November 27th, 1932

gelatin silver print, 20.32 x 25.4 cm