

In the Disturbance

Joshua Clover

Consider the relation of the figures. The man in his worker's cap, the three policemen. Why are the latter besieging the former? Are they representatives of the newly declared state disciplining a dissenter? Attached still to Spain, literally cracking down on a secessionist?

The tumultuous reversals of the Spanish Thirties make these matters elusive, perhaps one reason this picture has been on occasion misidentified. It shows "Disturbances at the Pza. de Sant Jaume," with the 1936 date of the Popular Front's victory and a true if temporary autonomy for Catalunya. The social temperature is rising. The Church of Sant Jaume would be burned, reputedly by anarchists, sometime after the Civil War burst forth months later. Violence in the plaza seems more likely. What kind of violence? A "disturbance." It can refer to an unruly drunk or a wholesale riot. Do we now know the positions here, officers truncheoning some guy while others exit the plaza, hurriedly it seems, and a man looks on in coat and hat, standing by his car?

Not really. That perhaps is the picture's force. As with much documentary photography, this promises some concrete history, some specificity. A true instance. Contrarily the content here is electrically generic. Are the cops not always beating a poor person? Do their coats not always mark them as adjutants of the mediating class the French call *robins*, those entitled to wear robes—doctors, judges, professors, priests? Must there not in fact always be a bourgeois gent pausing to witness this?

He is the secret. Not a punctum; we would have to force Barthes' categories. He does not leap out of the picture, does not hail us. His internalization is what matters, entirely in the picture, of the picture, perhaps more than anyone else. In a strange way the incident is happening to him, a fact concealed by his apparently minor role as onlooker. I erred when I said *always, always, always*. The *robins* are medieval, but the police are not, the bourgeois is not. They come into being late, one invented to serve the other. In the United States, police begin as slave catchers, in Europe to beat workers, to beat the poor. They exist to make property stay property such that it can issue further property, the sole compulsion of the bourgeois.

In this regard we are seeing the simplest possible scene. It looks like "violence" but it could just be titled "capital." This is its instance, never more generic. Context gives it its inner illumination: the Civil War which will be remembered for its parties and shifting alliances and betrayals and the victory of fascism, but which must also be recalled as a war to make such instances no longer generic, make them unfamiliar—not by making war on the cops of the bourgeois or on the poor but on the relationship that still holds them in place, still in the plaza, still in the disturbance.



Agustí Centelles
Barcelona, February 17, 1936
gelatin silver print, 23.9 x 29.9 cm



Navigating space and time: an event captured by Agustí Centelles in 1936 is grafted onto a Google Street View of the exact same spot—Saint James Square, Barcelona—in 2016 (above), and is commemorated by a corresponding map of the stars (overleaf).