

Atget and I: a Comparative Photographic Reading

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This poster contains active links to additional information about the research project. The links are denoted by an underline.

INTRODUCTION

This poster follows the completion of an undergraduate research award supervised by Dr. Susan Close of the Faculty of Architecture. Dr. Close is currently writing a book that examines the intersections of photography and the built environment. I have been a part of this research project since it began in May 2019.

The following exploration started as a research exercise that took the form of a handwritten image-reading video. The content has been developed for further discussion in this poster.

METHODOLOGY

In my first summer as a research assistant, my role in the project was to collect and review literature, investigate copyright permission, and design a website through which to share my experiences with other students and faculty. After an intermediate school year, I returned to the project in May. Of tremendous importance, too, was the school year between research terms. In it, I continued my study of photography and design through its application to my coursework.

This summer, I had opportunities to advance the project into a new social medium and devise new methods for sharing the research process.

A part of my assistantship has involved learning how to critically analyze visual material. Over the course of two summers, I have worked to hone my image-reading skills. This competency allows me to form ideas about what I look at and contribute to more advanced discussions on photography.

An aspect I consider in this poster that I pull from Dr. Close's research methodology relates to the subjective dimension of making images. The practice of photography, while commonly mistaken as producing indexical or "true" representations, is informed by individual interests.

It follows that a photograph, through critical analysis, can reveal information about the photographer's perceptions.¹ Alternately, images can be assigned different meanings by readers, unforeseen by their makers. My point is that photography, to both photographers and image-readers, is a creative, analytical, and personal process.

The way I will demonstrate my ability to engage in this process is through a comparative reading of two images: one made by a photographer I have spent two summers studying and one made by me. I hope that the choice to include an image I produced communicates how my interest in practicing and reading my own photography has grown as a result of this research project.

This poster will explore two photographs: my *Parc de Sceaux* and *Tuileries – Jardin de Robespierre* made by nineteenth-century documentarian Eugène Atget. The main questions of interest in this exploration are:

What relationships exist between *Tuileries – Jardin de Robespierre* and *Parc de Sceaux*?

What is the significance of these relationships?

These questions will be answered in three levels of discussion:

I. MAKING: What are the contexts of each photograph's making?

II. READING:
a. DESCRIPTION: What does each photograph describe?
b. ANALYSIS: What are the photographers trying to communicate through the image? What is revealed about the photographer?

III. CONCLUSION: What relationships exist between the photographs? Finally, what is the significance of these relationships?

Parc de Sceaux

I. MAKING

Parc de Sceaux is my own image made in September 2019 during a study trip to Europe. Using a digital camera, I produced the photograph for my own practice and viewing. I am a student of landscape architecture.

I made the photograph in Parc de Sceaux, in the town of Sceaux near Paris. The park was designed as a private estate in the seventeenth century.² During the French Revolution, the estate was nationalized.³ In the early twentieth century, it was restored into the public grounds that I visited in 2019.⁴

II. READING

a. DESCRIPTION

This image depicts a statue in front of seating and dense tree cover. (i) The statue sits centrally in the composition. (ii) The half-circle seating acts as a framing device and reinforces the statue as the focus of the photograph. (iii) The encircling tree in the background again frames the statue. The treeline draws attention to the texture of the trees as well as to the sense of their movement and encroachment upon the foreground. (iv) The statue is headless. This is not immediately obvious and may be

strange or surprising when noticed. For this reason, the statue's headlessness lends a *punctum* or piercing quality.

b. ANALYSIS

In this photograph, I interpret a dynamic between the trees, as "nature," and the statue, as "civilization." The two components exist in conflict with one another. The mass of trees hulks behind the injured statue as a representation of a grand and imposing "nature".

Another layer of the interpretation recognizes the strangeness of the statue in the context of a formal landscape park. As a student of landscape architecture, I understand that park sculpture is meant to glorify something, usually a person or philosophy, that the owners value. It is common to see statuary that references classical mythology in seventeenth-century parks such as Sceaux. The statue, however, cannot be identified in its condition; who or what the statue is made insignificant. It is unlisted on the park's map of sculpture, anonymous and invisible. What now does the statue represent?

This image questions the meaning of historical objects in contemporary parks and the relationship between humans and nature, in general.



Parc de Sceaux

III. CONCLUSION

I recognize my practice of photography as a creative, critical, and personal process of looking. I inquire through my camera. In the case of *Parc de Sceaux*, my intention was to learn something as a landscape architecture student. What could my photograph reveal about the park's spatial character and function?

In contrast, Atget conceived of his work rather differently. He did not view his work for personal benefit. He believed he created visual records of space for use by artists, which he was not. What *Tuileries* demonstrates, however, is the inevitable imprint a photographer leaves with a

photograph. As I have argued, Atget's image imparts a personal struggle. It communicates Atget's response to urban change. Paris was Atget's home and the subject of his life's work. Conversely, I photographed Parc de Sceaux as a tourist. Thus, my emotional response to the space is less invested. Interestingly, my experience of the French landscape had, previous to my visiting France, been informed by my study of Atget's body of work. Atget's influence on my photograph is evident through formal analysis.

While similar in visual structure, the two images differ in their reference

to their distinct "making" contexts. The significance of this relationship is that while photographs should not be relied upon as indexical, they do arise from a particular time and place. In order to make plausible interpretations, a reader must analyze an image in relation to its temporal and spatial contexts.

Parc de Sceaux addresses changing perceptions of a human/nature relationship. Through the statue symbol, the image points to the loss of original meaning for historical sculpture in public space. This idea relates to my experience as a landscape student in the twenty-first

century. I am frequently engaged in discussions about the evolving relations between "nature" and "culture", particularly how past notions such as the neoclassical picturesque contribute to contemporary challenges in the discipline.

Tuileries speaks more to the personal experience of the photographer in an evolving urban context. Through the statue symbol, the image expresses Atget's nostalgia for the familiarity of the Paris he had known but now saw rapidly disappearing.

A comparative reading of these two images demonstrates an ability to look critically, seek visual and conceptual connections between seemingly distinct artefacts, and form individual ideas about meaning.

Before arriving in France and before making *Parc de Sceaux*, I studied Eugène Atget in depth. I was familiar with the Parisian built environment only through his work. I believe this was in part why I photographed *Parc de Sceaux*: to remake what I had already seen. Ultimately, the image I produced is more than a rephotograph. It possesses its own unique meaning.

Most invaluable, my research has pressed me to see the camera as a tool for critical thinking. I will continue to apply the tool to analyze and find meaning in what I look at. I remain motivated to conduct the creative, analytical, and personal research of photography, long after my experience in the URA program.

Tuileries – Jardin de Robespierre

I. MAKING

Tuileries – Jardin de Robespierre was made by Eugène Atget, a documentary photographer from the nineteenth century. Atget produced the photograph in 1911 using a film camera, glass negative and albumen print.⁵ The image depicts a statue in Jardin de Robespierre, a garden in Paris's Tuileries. Atget typically developed prints to sell to painters and other artists.⁶ He did not consider himself a photographer but a commercial document-maker.⁷

Jardin des Tuileries was first constructed in the sixteenth century as the grounds for the Palais des Tuileries.⁸ Following the Revolution, the garden became a public park which it remains today.⁹

II. READING

a. DESCRIPTION

This image depicts a statue in front of a terrace and trees. (i) The statue, a monument to Pomona, the Roman goddess of abundance, sits centrally in the composition.¹⁰ (ii) The half-circle terrace acts as a framing device and reinforces the statue as the focus of the photograph. (iii) The trees in the background provide a richly textured backdrop. They also indicate Atget's

vantage point: he stood away from Pomona to include the trees within his frame. A consequence of this choice is that the statue appears small relative to the composition. The distance between the photographer and focus isolates the figure and creates tension between it and its setting.

b. ANALYSIS

Atget was a witness to a modernizing Paris. He saw firsthand the medieval city transform into Baron Haussmann's neoclassical vision. I argue this image reveals Atget's unease in unfamiliar urban spaces within Paris, outside of the Tuileries. There is a discordant relationship between the statue, which glorifies the classical period, and its representation as small and insignificant against a grand background. His distanced photographic confrontation with Pomona, a symbol for a time-worn and familiar social and aesthetic worldview, emphasizes Atget's alienation.

NOTES
1. "Current + Upcoming." Susan Close. <https://www.susanclose.com/current-upcoming>
2. "Le parc historique." Domaine départemental de Sceaux. <https://domaine-de-sceaux.hauts-de-seine.fr/le-domaine/le-parc-de-sceaux/le-parc-historique>
3. "Le parc."
4. "Le parc."
5. "Tuileries – Jardin de Robespierre." BnF Gallica. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/pt-v1b10516641s.item>
6. "Eugène Atget." MoMA. <https://www.moma.org/artists/229>
7. "Eugène Atget."
8. "Jardin des Tuileries." Paris Info. <https://en.parisinfo.com/paris-museum-monument/71304/Jardin-des-Tuileries>
9. "Jardin des Tuileries."
10. "Tuileries – Jardin de Robespierre."

IMAGES
Atget, Eugène. *Tuileries – Jardin de Robespierre*. c. 1911. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.
Mamchur, Lindsay. *Parc de Sceaux*. September 2019.