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CROSSING BORDERS, SHIFTING BOUNDARIES – THE AURA OF THE IMAGE

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EDITORIAL | THE NECESSITY OF THE CONTINGENT

Written by Edward Dimendberg

Every photograph evokes the delay and promise of redemption described by Eduardo Brito in his account of Nils Strindberg's images of the ill-fated Balloon Expedition to the South Pole in 1897. If in most cases an interval of thirty-three years and a series of tragic deaths do not accompany later viewings of images, the elements of surprise and wonder and the prospect of greater knowledge of even the most familiar reality still accompany making of photographs, even in our digital age when the lag between pressing a button and viewing an image is faster than the blink of an eye. The articles in this issue of Sophia explore what Benjamin called "the tiny spark of contingency" inherent in photography. Brito considers the links between spectrality and the photographic image. He encourages us to meditate on the morality of being a posthumous spectator. Similarly, Vitor dos Reis investigates the layers of meaning accompanying the 1903 stereoscopic photographs of London taken by Francisco Afonso Chaves, some of which entail our knowledge of the subsequent history of the city and its destruction. That Chaves understood his photographic practice as analogous to science further underscores the ethical dimension to what dos Reis calls being a "visionary witness". Making space for new modes of cognition is central to the photographic theory of Walter Benjamin investigated by Nélio Conceição, who provocatively links the writings of the philosopher on the medium to his theory of the destructive character. Destruction, according to Benjamin, produces not absolute emptiness but a space for reflection and action, thus once again linking photography to an ethical imperative. If photographers are witnesses, so are viewers of their work, though in a different manner that introduces recursion. The spectators of photographs – us – witness witnessing. Today, as photographs of war, trauma, and destruction become increasingly common, their effects remain widely debated. Are we hardened, desensitized, or immunized by the proxy witnessing that photographs encourage and facilitate? To witness witnessing has become a contemporary condition, perhaps the contemporary condition, whose ethical and political ramifications continue to unfold and seem to make ever more clear that knowledge and agency provide more comfort rather than less. I hope this issue of Sophia invites you, dear reader, to undertake this work of reflection, secure in the knowledge that you are making this journey in good company.