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***Nueva Lente*, Kracauer, and the Historical
Avant-Garde**

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Small wonder that camera-ready reality parallels historical reality in terms of its structure, its general constitution. Exactly as historical reality, it is partly patterned, partly amorphous—a consequence, in both cases, of the half-cooked state of our everyday world.
-Siegfried Kracauer *History: The Last Things Before the Last* (58)

Spanish cultural historians differ in their opinions of the achievements of *Nueva Lente*. Assessments range from the magazine being at best “una revolución divertida” (Fontcuberta *Creacion* 7) (a mild, fun revolution) to at worst “una conciencia ingenuamente equivocada” (Mira 24) (a naïve and misguided consciousness). *Nueva Lente* (1971–1983) was a magazine primarily devoted to showcasing and discussing the work of Spanish photographers.¹ Many of the photographers featured in its pages reacted strongly against the documentary style and oftentimes-radical politics of the generation of photographers that came before them.² Closely associated with artists such as Carlos Alcolea, Guillermo Pérez Villalta, Carlos Franco, Rafael Pérez Mínguez, and Juan Antonio Aguirre whose center of operations was Madrid’s Amadís Gallery, this loose collection of artists and intellectuals took on the name of the *Nueva Generación*. During the final years of the Franco regime, the *Nueva Generación* and its closely allied publication *Nueva Lente* consciously and provocatively declared that they were exploring an “antiartistic” art and an “apolitical” politics. *Nueva Lente* thrived on a highly eclectic visual poetics of the absurd, the irrational, and the surreal. At the same time, the magazine served as a conduit for the connection of Spanish photography to other international artistic phenomena such as conceptualism, Pop Art, and the beginnings of postmodernism.

According to Marie-Loup Sougez, the first volumes of *Nueva Lente* in

1971 had a distribution of about two thousand copies. By 1983, distribution topped at around fifteen thousand (573). Pablo Pérez Mínguez and Carlos Serrano were the co-directors of *Nueva Lente* from 1971 through 1975 and were primarily responsible for the first thirty-nine volumes. Photographer Jorge Rueda took over as editor in 1975 and remained at the helm for three years, whereupon Pérez Mínguez and Serrano returned as editors for a brief period. After 1979, the magazine lent itself to more commercial interests and was published under the direction of a series of different editors. In addition to the photographers and artists mentioned above, those whose names graced the pages of *Nueva Lente* between 1971 and 1975 read like a list of Spain's most influential photographers and conceptual artists: Javier Campano, Manuel Falces, Joan Fontcuberta, Eduardo Moreñe, Rafael Navarro, Miguel Oriola, Ouka-Lele, Luis Pérez Mínguez, América Sánchez, Marta Sentis, Carlos Villasante, and the so-called "Colectivo Yeti" consisting of Miguel Angel Mendo, Félix Lorrio, and Juan Ramón Yuste.

This essay looks at the initial conception and underlying philosophy of the first four years of the publication of *Nueva Lente* (1971–1975) with the intention of exploring how artists in early 1970s Spain situated themselves at a moment in Spain's history when the role of art in society—specifically photography, in this case—was changing. In the waning years of the Franco regime, art was considered fertile ground for establishing new connections and interpretations of the past, present, and future and the artists involved in publishing *Nueva Lente* between 1971 and 1975 found particular inspiration in the avant-garde movements of the beginning of the twentieth century. For a deeper understanding of the process of looking to the past in order to create something new in the present, this essay turns to Siegfried Kracauer's ideas about history and photography. Kracauer is best known as an early twentieth-century philosopher and cultural critic, and his 1969 *History: The Last Things Before the Last* provides great insight into the connection between the possibilities and meanings of history for both the historical avant-garde and its 1970s successors.

Like almost all other avant-garde publications, *Nueva Lente's* basic premise was theorized and defined as early as 1971 in a series of manifestos. One of the most powerful is found in volume 4, where an anonymous editorial states that the purpose of the publication is to break with the following:

una serie de falsos prejuicios, establecidos desde un principio, los cuales negaban firmemente las mayores posibilidades de expresión plástica de una de las artes como es la fotografía. [...] Elaborar una nueva fotografía no consistirá en el mal aprovechamiento (abuso) de una sofisticada técnica para la fotografía. De objetos fotográficos, más o menos bellos, decididamente falsos o exageradamente reales. La nueva fotografía no lo será por nueva sino por poseer unos firmes y verdaderos

planteamientos, los cuales nada tienen que ver con la frustrada pasividad de los actualmente establecidos faltos de la más mínima capacidad sorpresiva. (5)

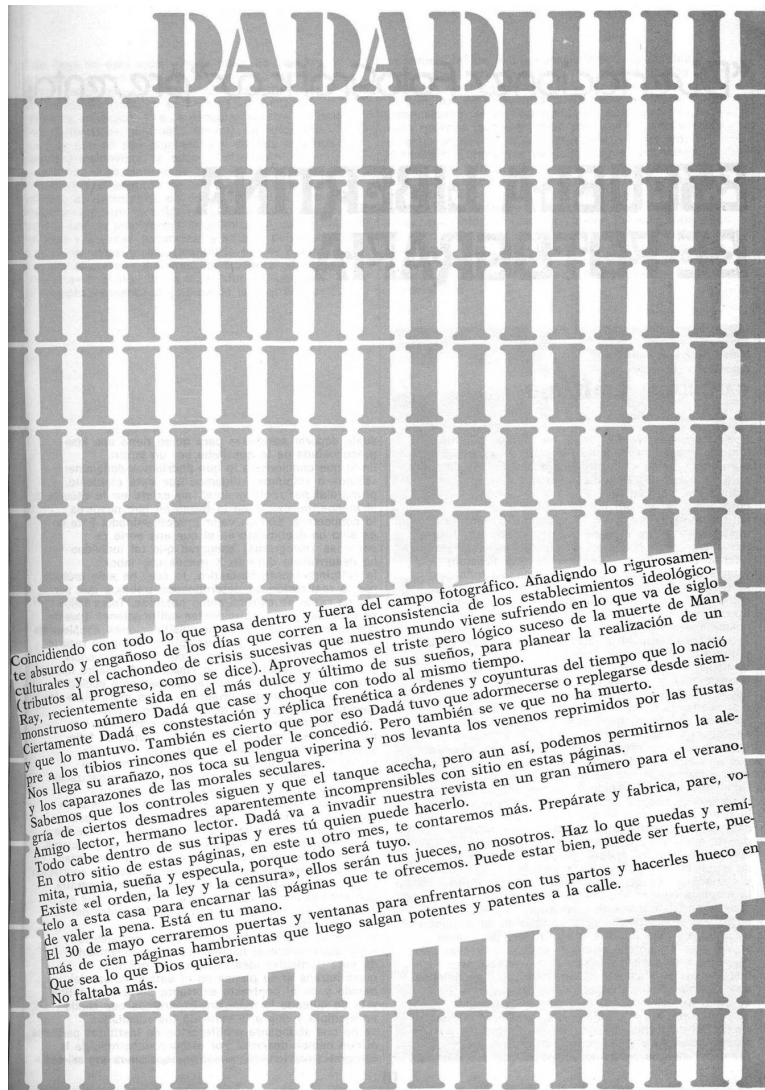
(A series of false judgments, established from the start, which firmly denied the many possibilities of artistic expression of an art like photography. [. . .] To create a new kind of photography did not mean treating poorly (abusing) a sophisticated photographic technique. Of falsifying or making exaggeratedly real photographs out of photographic objects that are more or less beautiful. New photography won't be new because it's new but because it will have some solid and true approaches which have nothing to do with the frustrated passivity of the current approaches which lack even the most minimal capacity to surprise.)

Between 1971 and 1975 *Nueva Lente* dedicated regular sections of its issues to exploring just what these “firmes y verdaderos planteamientos” (solid and true approaches) would be for a young generation of Spanish photographers looking for a way to make their work relevant and revolutionary in rapidly changing national and international landscapes. In addition to regularly published editorials, these regular columns had names like “Guiagráfica” and went into some detail about the possibilities and limits of new photography techniques, often using structuralism to talk about photography as a language, while another, “Bombón Era,” would comment on accompanying photomontages, often drawing on Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag for more semiotic approaches to the production and use of images in the age of mass communication. While Barthes and Sontag periodically make their way into the debates about photography and modern society that appear in the first few years of the publication of *Nueva Lente*, before 1975 it is primarily to the historical avant-garde that this *Nueva Generación* turns for its conceptual base.

The history of Spanish avant-garde photography between the World Wars is complex because the avant-garde photographers had their own highly individual approaches to the craft and drew on a large number of national and international influences. Their work drew on everything from surrealism to constructivism, from New Objectivism to Art Deco, at the same time as it incorporated the national visual imaginary by drawing on Goya, the Quijote, and local mass culture for inspiration. To complicate matters even more, in “El surrealismo para el que lo trabaja,” Joan Fontcuberta explains that Spanish photographers during the first third of the twentieth century often pursued their professional goals abroad if they could, frustrated by the political and economic tensions that made their work difficult and drawn by the avant-garde movements of Paris and other major European cities. “Esta situación incitó a muchos de los artistas más inquietos a escaparse al extranjero para entrar en contacto directo con los distintos

movimientos intelectuales de vanguardia. Los que no tuvieron esta oportunidad se mostraron muy atentos a las nuevas ideas, que asimilaron con avidez” (80) (This situation made many of the more unsatisfied artists escape abroad in order to be in direct contact with the different intellectual avant-garde movements. Those who did not have this opportunity proved to be very attentive to new ideas, to which they avidly assimilated). Fontcuberta argues that, even at a geographical distance from André Breton, surrealism had a particularly strong presence in Spain. This is significant, because surrealism is famously permeable and blends easily with other types of representational concepts. In Spain, master avant-garde photographers such as Pere Català i Pic (1889–1971) were using some of the same photomontage techniques as Man Ray and Pierre Boucher while he was also engaged in commercial photography inspired by photographers such as Edward Steichen and Paul Outerbridge. During his short life, Nicolás de Leukona (1913–1937) did significant work along the lines of Alexander Rodchenko and Lászlo Moholy-Nagy and his photo collages were often similar to those of Raoul Haysmann. Most Spanish photography historians also consider the early photography of Josep Renau (1907–1982) to be firmly embedded in the ideas of the Dadaists and Surrealists.³

The term avant-garde appears in every issue of *Nueva Lente*, from the very first issue. While there are some references to the Spanish photographers mentioned above, it is usually the non-Spanish avant-garde photographers who receive the most attention. A particularly strong and sustained admiration for the photographer Man Ray (1890–1972), for example, resulted in the editors’ decision to devote the entire one hundred pages of 1974’s issue 26 to his work. One Dada-inspired open call in issue 18 reads “aprovechamos el triste pero lógico suceso de la muerte de Man Ray, recientemente sida en el más dulce y último de sus sueños, para planear la realización de un monstruo número Dadá que case y choque con todo al mismo tiempo” (Fig. 1) (We take the opportunity of the logical event of the death of Man Ray, recently left in the sweetest and last of his dreams, to plan the creation of our Dada issue, which merges and crashes with everything at the same time).

Fig. 1. *Nueva Lente* vol. 18.

Another later call, in issue 20, takes on even more dadaist trappings with the childish and repetitive scrawl of the word “Dada” announcing a “convocatoriallamadainvitaionprovocacion,” a term which appears diagonally in a collage of messages written in different fonts (Fig. 2).

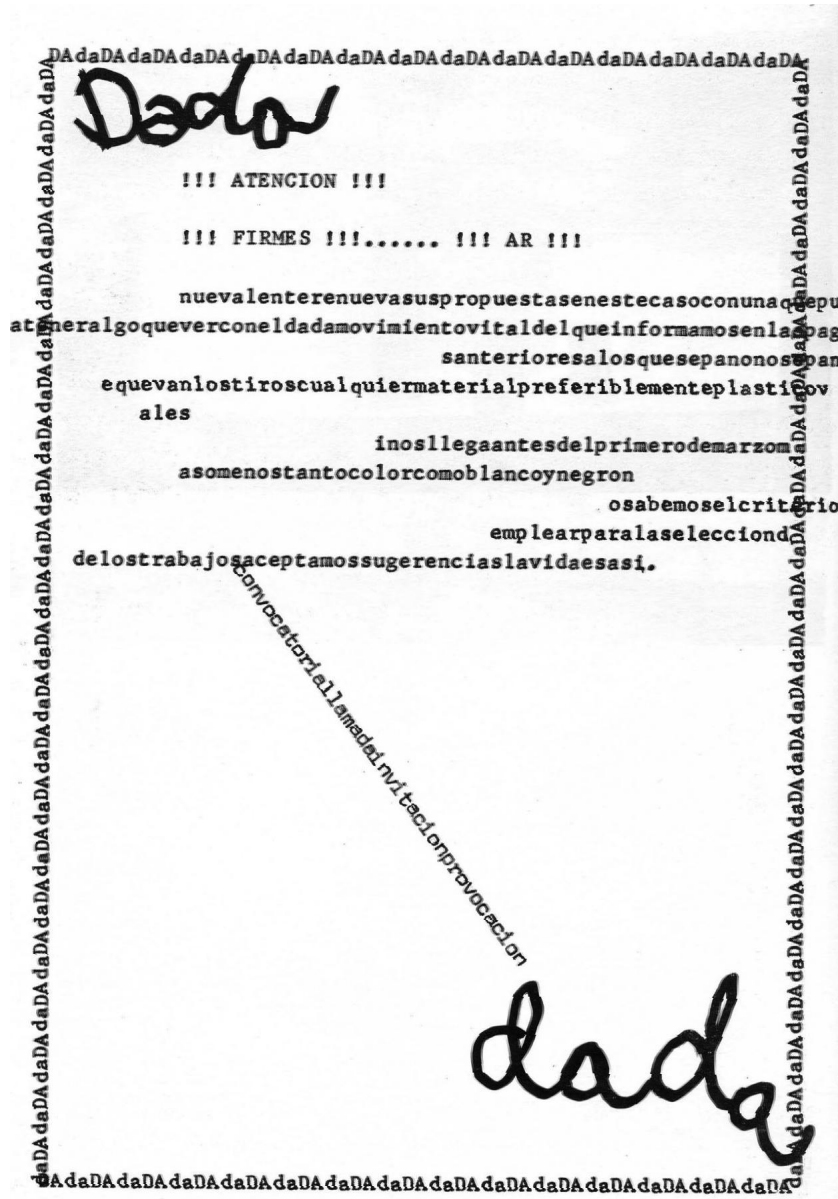


Fig. 2. Nueva Lente vol. 20.

The lack of spaces between the most important words and the unexpected location of what are usually ordered lines of text on the page make the reader aware of the fact that this call is meant to inspire active anticipation from all readers and photographers interested in collaborating on something that is simultaneously new yet grounded in a well-documented history.

Conspicuously, the names of Dalí and Buñuel do not appear anywhere in the first thirty issues of the magazine. The sustained attention to the avant-garde is on a largely international scale. In 1972's issue 9, editor Pablo Pérez Mínguez makes clear this frustration on the part of young photographers of his generation when he states that “por el mismo precio que cuesta hacer un catálogo de una exposición de Bretón se puede promocionar toda la fotografía española” (7) (for the amount of money it takes to come out with a catalog of an exhibit on Breton you can promote all of Spanish photography). There was a playful coupon for free photographs by Pablo Pérez Mínguez inserted deep into double issue 17–18 in 1973, for example (84) (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. *Nueva Lente* vols. 17–18.

Pablo Pérez Mínguez summarizes the “apolitical” politics of *Nueva*

Lente when he says that,

estábamos encima de la política. Éramos una publicación acrítica; no pusimos una bandera comunista para que no nos censurasen, pero poníamos una bandera española desenfocada, un billete de San Idelfonso de mil pesetas en las portadas o un torero, que era Ignacio Gómez de Liaño, con peluca, antifaz y un cordero en los brazos. Había que leer la imagen más allá de su obviedad. Nuestra actitud se acercaba más al dadaísmo que al panfleto político. Nosotros no poníamos a Carrillo con peluca, sino a Gómez de Liaño con peluca. (Mira 67)

(we were above politics. We were an acritical publication; we didn't include a Communist flag so they wouldn't censor us, but we did feature a Spanish flag out of focus, a one thousand peseta bill of Saint Idelfonso on the cover, or a bullfighter, who was Ignacio Gómez de Liaño, with a wig, a mask and a lamb in his arms. You had to read the image beyond the obvious meaning. Our attitude had more in common with Dadaism than a political pamphlet. We didn't put a wig on Carrillo, we put a wig on Gómez de Liaño.)

In short, *Nueva Lente* attempted to speak from outside of Spanish politics, outside of the cultural marketplace and outside of any sense of national pride. Even as it drew inspiration from the avant-garde, it positioned itself as the avant-garde's younger brother.

It is paradoxical that, in terms of both design and content, the pages of *Nueva Lente* were remarkably heterogeneous during the first few years of publication. Some of the advertisements for photography equipment seemed to have been culled from the pages of late-nineteenth-century pages of *Blanco y Negro*, and these were found alongside color images of fashionably dressed 1970s models from abroad. But this diversity of images, looks, and of thought was precisely what gave the publication coherence. A wide variety of philosophies of the visual image made their way into each issue. Conceptually, however, the backbone of the magazine was a regular section created by Pérez Minguez called "Vale Todo" which gave name to the regularly used term "valetodismo." This philosophy of "Vale Todo" positioned *Nueva Lente* so that its power was precisely in its powerlessness, in its flexibility to take on a variety of projects as they presented themselves. Located nowhere because of its lack of cultural authority and everywhere because of its intensely collaborative and democratic stance, *Nueva Lente* left itself open to local and international as well as historical influences, the avant-garde being primary among them during the period of 1971–1975, before postmodern influences would play a greater role in the conceptualization of the magazine and of Spanish photography in general.

It is significant that the vast majority of the photographers featured

during the first years of publication were self-taught. Mira explains that the “Filosofía pobre” concept embraced by the creators of *Nueva Lente* was an attempt to,

imaginar nuevas aventuras expresivas para la fotografía y suponía, en efecto, un esfuerzo experimental que debería luchar contra el ‘purismo’ de la fotografía nacional anclada en la estrecha noción del hecho fotográfico y su valoración como imagen, vetando cualquier creación que se aleje del procedimiento típico de exponer, revelar y secar sin alteración alguna. (50)

(imagine new adventures in expression for photography and it assumed an experimental effort that was intended to fight against the ‘purism’ of a national photography rooted in the narrow notion of photography and its value as an image, denying any creation that distanced itself from the typical process of exposing, developing and drying without any alteration whatsoever.)

While the term “fotografía pobre” began to appear in *Nueva Lente*’s columns as early as in the fall of 1972, it was Luis Garrido in 1974’s issue 34 who went into some depth on the term in his passionate manifesto “Por una fotografía pobre” (19) (For a poor photography).⁴ In two narrow columns that read more like a poem than a prose text, Garrido positions a new generation of revolutionary amateur Spanish photographers against what he considers to be the established media industry in a celebration of the more democratic visual technologies flooding into the marketplace in the 1970s. He begins *in media res* by positioning himself and all who are looking for a new type of photography:

Pero ellos se empecinan en amedrentarnos, y emplean para ello todos los recursos a su alcance. Nos hacen creer que sin dieciséis recubridoras capas no lograremos captar nunca el calor de un abrazo. Que sin una Hasselblad no podremos plasmar la verdad de una sonrisa, y que es evidente que necesitamos una Sinar para expresar la dulzura de una voz. (19)

(But they insist on intimidating us, and to do that they use all of the resources within their reach. They make us believe that without sixteen filters we will never capture the warmth of an embrace. That without a Hasselblad we won’t be able to give form to the truth of a smile, and that it’s obvious that we need a Sinar to express the sweetness of a voice.)

Garrido defies the conventional wisdom that experience makes a good

photographer, that the latest technology results in better photographs, and that meaningful photography can only be disseminated within a highly professionalized system of culture industry technicians and specialists. Celebrating the individual, the subjective, and the decidedly low-tech work of independent art photographers such as David Baley and Bernard Lossu who made notable use of basic Polaroid and Instamatic cameras, Garrido tells his readers:

basta ya de llorar por una Spectra, cuando todos sabemos que en blanco y negro todo sale. [. . .] Nuestra meta no es aprender los más complicados trucos ni dominar los aparatos más complejos, sino expresar, como podamos, lo que vivimos y pensamos. [. . .] Queremos hacer saltar los estrechos cauces de la ortodoxia y regar con la expresión gráfica de nuestras ideas la planicie adusta y desértica de nuestra cultura mesetaria. Y que quede claro, no por pobres menos honrado. (19)

(enough crying for a Spectra, when we know that everything comes out in black and white. [. . .] Our goal is not to learn the most complicated tricks or to dominate the most complex cameras, but to express, as well as we can, what we live and think. [. . .] We want to cross the narrow channels of orthodoxy and water the desert-like plane of our culture with the graphic expression of our ideas. And let's be clear: we're no less honorable because we're poor.)

Like the highly individualistic and subjective experiments of the Dadaists and Surrealists, “fotografía pobre” wants to explore what can happen when a person with something to say and camera in hand makes art outside of, or even deliberately against, the institutions of art in any given modern society. During the early twentieth century, as well as during the 1970s, this required a significant loosening of the definition of art itself. For many in the visual arts in Spain, the pages of *Nueva Lente* became a place where competing ideas of the limits and potentialities of photography in Spain were competing for attention.

In the photographic images and editorials of the first four years of the publication, there is an important philosophical consideration of the relationship between photography, reality, and history that is presented through the discussion of concepts such as photographic objectivity and the truth of the photographic image. It is significant that these discussions bear a striking resemblance to the debates taking place on these very same topics in the first few decades of the twentieth century, especially in the 1920s. If the true goal of photography was no longer to capture reality, the editorials of *Nueva Lente* proposed, it was doubtful that the camera was able to witness reality with any impartiality or objectivity. Issue 27 (whose cover declared that “La realidad no existe”) was devoted exclusively to this topic, for

example. In this issue, Jorge Rueda writes in his idealistic column “Oiga Usted” about the increasing difficulty for photographers of defining what is real:

Caballero, es evidente que cada día resulta más difícil trazar la raya que separa LO QUE PASA de LO QUE UNO CREE QUE PASA (o de lo que quiere que pasara). [. . .] Una foto no es más que un signo, una representación gráfica de cosas que pasan, más o menos provocadas, dentro de un concepto de realidad tan ampliable o interpretable como quiera el sujeto que las produce. (Rueda 39)

(Listen gentlemen, it’s obvious that every day it becomes more difficult to find the line that separates WHAT IS HAPPENING from WHAT ONE THINKS IS HAPPENING (or what one wants to happen). [. . .] A photo is nothing more than a sign, a graphic representation of things that happen, more or less provoked, within a concept of reality so extended or open to interpretation as the subject that produces it.)

In the very same issue, in an article called “Dígaselo con fotos,” Joaquín Garrido plays this semiotic or structuralist game as well, repeatedly insisting that photography is a language. “La capacidad de creación de imágenes nuevas es indiscutible, y su comprensión está en función de la aceptación de un código” (The capacity to create new images is indisputable, and its understanding is a function of accepting the code), he writes, adding that “una imagen es un signo, se puede pensar con ella sin acudir a palabras” (11) (an image is a sign, one can think with it without resorting to words). Significantly, though, Garrido ends his short treatise on photography as a highly ordered code system by recalling the ultimate authority of the surrealist Breton. One sentence in italics below the author’s byline and above a short bibliography, including only three academic texts (Noam Chomsky’s *The Formal Nature of Language*, Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Course of General Linguistics* and John Lyon’s *New Horizons in Linguistics*) reads as follows: “Dado que el estructuralismo casi nadie se lo toma en serio y que el simpático surrealista Breton dijo hace mucho que *significante y significado estaban unidos en su esencia, se ponen unas notas a pie de página y todo queda tan bien*” (11) (Given that almost no one takes Structuralism seriously and the kindly Surrealist Breton said some time ago that the signifier and the signified were in essence one, this is put in a footnote and it all makes sense). This is just one example of how, in the early 1970s, the pages of *Nueva Lente* became a sounding board for new cross-disciplinary philosophies of language and visuality such as semiotics or structuralism that had their roots in the artistic project of the avant-garde.

Just as in the debates of the historical avant-garde, connections between technology and mass culture are theorized consistently in *Nueva Lente*’s first

few years of publication. Carlos Serrano sees the publication as a way for photography to incite a democratic, open social intervention. “Yo dividiría sólo en dos los tipos de revistas: dos modelos de actitudes: una que moviliza, arrastra, incita, como fue ‘Nueva Lente,’ y otra que funciona como escaparate sin más” (Mira 98) (I would divide the types of magazines in two: two types of attitudes: one that mobilizes, that motivates, that incites, such as ‘*Nueva Lente*,’ and the other that functions as a showcase and nothing else). *Nueva Lente* espoused the idea that photographic technology was becoming more and more accessible, and that this democratization of technology needed to be taken into account when theorizing and promoting a new type of photography. Not only that: with advances in photographic technology and its increasing availability, photography offered nothing less than the opportunity to change the way reality itself was viewed and understood. Using the technique of collage, altered photographic images drawing attention to the seemingly invisible hand of the photographer is a constant in the cultural debates of the 1920s.

One of the most important theorists of modern photography is Siegfried Kracauer (1899–1966). He famously wrote about modern society’s emerging social mentality as one lacking in purpose. By making such observations, Kracauer was moving toward an idea of social wholeness similar to that espoused by György Lukács. Like Lukács, Kracauer ultimately translated his search for what both authors called “totality” into a belief in political Marxism. It is in his posthumously published book, *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, that Kracauer expounds on the parallels between history and photography, a topic he originally explored in his 1927 essay “Photography” and later considered in his *Theory of Film*, also published in 1969.⁵

Kracauer’s work of the 1920s sought to explain modern life’s categories of thought in terms of its optical forms.⁶ It is during this decade that both Kracauer and Walter Benjamin, for example, began to write about cinema as a fundamentally new form of reception—calling it “distraction”—containing its own truth-value which neither art nor philosophy as disciplines were able to recognize. “For Kracauer,” writes Hansen, “the audience’s abandoning themselves to ‘distraction’—to pure externality, to the discontinuous sequences of splendid sense impressions—represents a mimetic process which reveals the ‘true’ structure of modern reality, thus acquiring moral significance” (314). The second theme of Kracauer’s work that culminates in *History: The Last Things Before the Last* is a phenomenologically inspired desire to understand the meanings of mass culture. “Spatial images are the dreams of society. Wherever the hieroglyphs of these images can be deciphered, one finds the basis of social reality” (163). In Rodowick’s words, Kracauer’s writes about “the desire to comprehend the lived experience of a society dominated by capital, whose historically given forms of reason are both veiled and materially embodied in visual phenomena”

(116).

During the first phase of *Nueva Lente*, certain members of the historical avant-garde are frequently mentioned; Breton, Aragon, Man Ray, and the Dadaists receive the most attention. But there is no direct mention of Kracauer. This article does not intend to prove that the *Nueva Lente* project was founded either entirely or in part on Kracauer's thoughts about the connections between history and photography. It does, however, want to draw attention to the work of Kracauer as a way of explaining exactly how the *Nueva Lente* photographers and editorial writers in particular understood themselves as artists in a time of particularly acute aesthetic, historical, and political change during the last years of the Franco regime. In addition, a look at Kracauer's emphasis on modern visual culture and how it is closely connected to forms of historical knowledge helps to better understand the attraction of the artists of the early 1970s to the historical avant-garde.

In essence, what Kracauer does in *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, is to study the relationship between a triangle of what he thinks are the redeeming and even hopeful future possibilities of historiography, photography, and the *mémoire involontaire* of Proust. History and photography are understood as special categories of representing and knowing that alone are capable of exploring and comprehending those aspects of experience to which philosophy and art have become blind, according to Kracauer. History is not a systematic study of the writing of history as much a study of how the responsibilities and limitations of history have been understood over time. In fact, Kracauer begins the book with the metaphor of the "historian's journey" through both space and time. Kracauer compares what he calls the "historic approach" and the "photographic approach"—both of which are modes of alienation formed by two different types of experience: "realist" and "formative."

Kracauer begins to explore the interconnectedness of the historiography, photography, and Proustian *mémoire involontaire* when he points out that "the beginnings of modern historiography are marked by a strong concern with the realistic tendency which stood little chance of asserting itself in the then prevailing moral and philosophical histories" (48). Kracauer looks to German historian Leopold von Ranke's 1824 *Geschichte der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514* as a watershed moment in a significant shift in historiography away from the previously "moral" and "philosophical" histories. For Kracauer, Ranke was revolutionary as an historian because his sole object was to show "how things really were" (50). For Kracauer, it is not a coincidence that:

this book appeared in 1824. Only fifteen years later, and photography came into being. It seems of great interest to me that, in the dimension of the representative arts, Daguerre's invention raised issues and demands similar to those which played so large a role in contemporary

historiography. (49)

If there are different types of historical writing, argues Kracauer, the realist tendency is most like what he calls the “technical histories” in which the greatest amount of detail is accumulated for the smallest period of time. Analogous is photography, which Kracauer sees as a peculiarly original medium because of “the camera’s exceptional ability to record as well as reveal visible, or potentially visible, physical reality” (50). Kracauer opposes this tendency of photography to that of painting, saying of the new medium that it was uniquely attuned to follow the realistic tendency to an extent unattainable in the traditional arts” (50). Citing Delacroix comparing daguerreotype to a “dictionary of nature” (50), Kracauer discusses the late-nineteenth-century privileging of the emotional detachment of the photographer and the historian as objective indiscriminate mirrors. This problematizing of discourses of realist representation, in the face of new developments of thought that question objectivity and the existence of reality itself, were the very same ones that the Spanish photographers of *Nueva Lente* were writing about in the 1970s.

Kracauer explains why he is suspicious of this purportedly more objective or “real” approach in both photography and the writing of history, saying that “naïve realism has long since gone; and nobody today would dream of calling the camera a mirror” (52). In the context of 1970s Spain, for the creators of *Nueva Lente*, the realist or documental photography that was at the center of photographic production since the 1950s embodied this “naïve realism.” Interestingly, Kracauer explains what he means by this by conducting his own original analysis of Proust’s discussion of photography in his 1920 *Guermites Way*. In *The Theory of Film*, Kracauer reconsiders Marcel’s visit to his grandmother, characterizing the experience of photography as “the product of complete alienation” (14–15). Visiting his grandmother unannounced after many years, Proust describes Marcel’s perception of her as mechanical, as if he were a photographer or a stranger, where the palimpsest of years of loving memories are stripped away to reveal a dejected old woman. Kracauer thinks that Proust describes this perception in order to oppose it to the experience of what the French author called *mémoire involontaire*. Kracauer, however, sees a more subtle dialectic in place in which the harsh light of photography is inseparable from aesthetic agency and the force of interpretation, such that the photographer, no less than the historian, becomes an “imaginative reader” whose formative, interpretative efforts are inseparable from the degree of knowledge which “historical reality” may yield.

The idea of the photographer as both artist and “imaginative reader” is empowering and revolutionary to anyone involved in theorizing a new photography. According to Kracauer, what *mémoire involontaire* reveals in its analogy to the experience of historical subjectivity is best described by

the figure of the extraterrestrial or exile—a fragmented subjectivity produced by a superimposition of discontinuous moments. “The exile’s true mode of existence,” writes Kracauer, “is that of a stranger. So he may look at his previous existence with the eyes of one ‘who does not belong to the house It is only in the state of self-effacement, or homelessness, that the historian can commune with the material of his concern” (*History* 83–84). This exile or outsider positioning was essential to the *Nueva Lente* group as they sought not to break into the institutions of cultural power (for them the Spanish photography industry in general) and, as we have seen, their editorials articulated repeatedly the attempt to take apart what they considered to be the stagnation of the institutionalization of the art of photography itself.

Like the creators of *Nueva Lente*, Kracauer sees photography and post-realist history as full of potential. “If photography is an art, it is an art with a difference: unlike the traditional arts, it takes great pride in not completely consuming its raw material. [. . .] In exact analogy to the photographic approach, the “historical approach” only if the historian’s spontaneous intuition does not interfere with his loyalty to the evidence but, conversely, benefits his empathetic absorption in it” (56). By this Kracauer means that, unlike other visual media, photography draws attention to its own technology and reproducibility.⁷ Kracauer concludes his development of the parallels between the photographic and the historiographic by saying that both are best served when there exists “the ‘right’ balance between the realistic and formative tendencies. . . . Like the photographer, the historian is loath to neglect his recording obligations over his preconceptions and fully to consume the raw material he tries to mould” (56–57). Each and every photographer determines this “right” balance for him or herself.

Kracauer insists on the redemptive qualities of history and photography, unlike philosophy and aesthetics. Wigoder states of this dichotomy that “if history and photography define areas of epistemic activity which fall outside of the claims of philosophical and artistic activity, this acknowledgment constitutes not the problem but the solution for Kracauer” (188). Kracauer, then, demonstrates how history and photography should be valued for their resistance to closure, their ambiguity, and their resistance to systematic thought. For Kracauer, it is art and philosophy that should be approached with suspicion because of their generality and abstractness. “They favor either/or decisions, develop a penchant for exclusiveness, and have a way of freezing into dogmas” (215). They are also blind, according to Kracauer, to the experience of everyday life. Kracauer’s thoughts on the parallels between historiography and photography is complex in that he asserts the camera as a force of alienation and the position of the historian as that of an exile. Yet this is the price to pay for the knowledge that history and photography provide. Kracauer sees in both ways of reflecting on reality a redemptive, almost utopian potential for knowledge capable of preserving

meaning and furthering understanding without falling into the trap of universal truth.

It is no surprise, then, that the founders of *Nueva Lente* found inspiration in the desire of the artists and philosophers of the 1920s who so passionately engaged in questions of the reproducibility of reality, the relationship of the past to the present, and the role of the artist in society. Kracauer wrote, in 1927, “from the perspective of memory, photography appears as a jumble that consists partly of garbage” (“Photography” 51). The memorable, that which a person chooses to include in his or her own identity, makes up their “history,” to use Kracauer’s term. It is the consciousness of this ongoing and selective process of inclusion and omission in the age of mass production, as well as the democratization of visual technologies, that brings together the so-called “apolitical” avant-garde and the artistic experiments of the 1970s such as *Nueva Lente*.

Paradoxically, one of the ways in which *Nueva Lente*, in its first and most innovative phase, was most like the historical avant-garde was in its process of commoditization. In spite of the above-mentioned desires and clearly articulated efforts to embark on a photographic project which valued a lack of adherence to any particular style or set of rules, driven by “la actividad abierta y libre, sin más calificativos que los mínimamente imprescindibles para entendernos” (open and free activity, with no more qualifiers than are absolutely needed for us to understand one another), where the only directive was “su rechazo de todo calificativo o tendencia que suponga para el fotógrafo la imposibilidad de realizar su obra por encima de una determinada estética o forma de hacer ya vigente” (“Cada vez más cerca” 9) (a rejection of any qualifier or tendency that imposed on the photographer the impossibility of creating work that went beyond a fixed aesthetic or currently accepted way of doing things), the *Nueva Lente* project soon exhausted itself. By as early as 1973, *Nueva Lente* already represented within the Spanish photography world a defined “tendencia o modo de pensar” (tendency or way of thinking) known as “the *Nueva Lente* style.” Like the avant-garde of the first third of the twentieth century, *Nueva Lente* tried to deconstruct this very same, increasingly identifiable style. Carlos Serrano, in a 1988 interview, looks back at the *Nueva Lente* project with the benefit of hindsight and concludes that, “en la época de las vanguardias, en el dadaísmo, y el surrealismo, por ejemplo, la presencia de los fotógrafos era notaria. Y curiosamente, el arte no ha dado ningún gran paso adelante desde los años treinta, sobre todo si se compara con lo que ocurrió en el cambio de siglo” (qtd. in Mira 102) (during the avant-garde, during Dadaism and Surrealism, for example, the presence of the photographers was noticeable. And curiously, art has not taken another great step ahead since the thirties, especially if we think about what happened at the turn of the century.)

This period of experimentation and redefinition of photography in Spain soon came to take on a new look and new terminology, most notably with

the turn in Western European culture toward what was called the “postmodern.” It is important to note that the postmodern would also be known for the creation of images that sought to shock the viewer, and for the use of manipulated images along with montage and collage. What is the difference, then, between the use of these techniques by the photographers of the historical avant-garde and that of the neo-avant-garde photographers of *Nueva Lente* in the early seventies? Fontcuberta answers this question by contrasting the use of photomontage by postmodern Spanish artists, such as Carmelo Hernando, América Sánchez, and Ricard Ibáñez in the eighties and nineties to the photomontage of the earlier part of the century. For him, the postmodern,

flirteó en la forma con el surrealismo, pero no en el fondo: todo aparecía sobradamente claro y bien hecho, excesivamente perfecto. Como si no fuera suficientemente evidente que el manierismo en el que se sumergían de modo deliberado constituía la clave de una parodia del *status quo* actual de la imagen: hegemonía del marketing sobre la imaginación, del espíritu enciclopédico sobre la naturaleza, de los archivos sobre la experiencia y del reciclaje sobre la invención. (“El surrealismo” 84)

(flirted with Surrealism in terms of form, but not in depth: everything seemed exceptionally clear and well done, overly perfect. As if it weren’t clear enough that the mannerism in which it was willingly immersing itself was the key to a parody of the status quo of the image: hegemony of marketing over imagination, of the encyclopedic spirit over nature, of the archive of experience and recycling over invention.)

In the late 1960s, Kracauer argued that history and photography should be considered privileged or unique categories of representation because they have significantly different ways of exploring and comprehending the modern experience than those of philosophy and art (that which is not photographic). Most significantly, Kracauer, argues, photography demands a broader understanding of history, not because the camera can produce objective mirrors of reality but, because the photographer becomes both artist and “imaginative reader” while, at the same time both artist and viewer are forced into a process of imaginative interpretation that constantly engages memory. This understanding of the photographer as a key player in the redefining of history from the margins was enormously attractive to the Spanish photographers, authors, and artists during the late Franco regime. However, as Fontcuberta puts it, “la democracia puso fin a todo ello” (“El surrealismo” 84) (democracy put an end to all that). As he points out in the quote above, with the advent of democracy in Spain and the accompanying postmodern turn, photographers would have a more distant relationship to

their subjects. With the advent of parody, pastiche, and a different attitude toward the recycling of previous images, photography's ability to rethink the past would change significantly. This change is clearly visible in the pages of *Nueva Lente* as it takes a turn towards a more openly postmodern approach after 1975.

The commonalities between those involved in the first years of *Nueva Lente* and the photographers of the early-twentieth-century avant-garde are great. Both generations attacked the authority of realist photography by adopting experimental forms—collage, montage, coloration, multi-media presentation which included the use of written texts, the democratization of the means of production and distribution through the use of new visual technologies—in a desire to break with the photography establishment. Just as there were overlapping aesthetic and ideological tendencies present in the photography of the European historical avant-garde during a period of great political upheaval, the early 1970s in Spain were years during which remarkably rich debates were coming out of a vibrant art scene that strained at the limits of the Franco regime harder than ever in the real hope that the dictator's life would soon come to an end and a radically new government put into place. It is significant that, as the Franco regime was on its last and artists were bracing themselves for what they hoped would be an important shift in what was artistically and socially possible, it is to the 1910s and 1920s avant-garde that they look first for inspiration.

Notes

1. Almost every comprehensive history of Spanish photography notes the relative lack of photography magazines providing a centralized, authoritative presence to the industry. One magazine, *Arte Fotográfico*, was the first to have a nation-wide distribution. Professional and amateur photography clubs or associations hosted regular photography contests whose winners were chosen by the publication's editorial board. Documentary and pictorialism were the most common styles of photography in this publication until well into the 1980s.
2. In 1956 an important and highly original photography magazine called *AFAL* grew out of an initiative of a diverse coalition of photographers based in Almería calling themselves the "Agrupación fotográfica almeriense." This publication was notably different from the inward-looking *Arte Fotográfico* in that it actively sought to publish the work of photographers from the rest of Europe and America. Editors José María Artero and Carlos Pérez Siquier also provided a home for a new generation of Spanish photographers such as Joan Colom, Gabriel Cualladó, Ramón Masats, Oriol Maspons, and Alberto Schommer. *AFAL* would only survive for seven years, however, due to steady harassment of the Franco dictatorship's censors and the subsequent difficulties finding advertisers to finance the project. *AFAL* is often mentioned by the editors of *Nueva Lente* as an inspiration for their publication.
3. For an in-depth description of how Spanish avant-garde photographers and filmmakers of the early twentieth century negotiated the individual, the national, and

- the international, see Mendelson, where she explains how the history of European modernism has, in general, not been sensitive to the heterogeneity of the Spanish avant-garde's responses to technological innovation, national identity, and ideology.
4. The entirety of 1975's volume 36, devoted to the photography of disposable cameras and including a high number of images sent in by amateur photographers, clearly takes up Garrido's invitation to engage in this type of "fotografía pobre."
 5. In *The Last Things Before the Last*, Kracauer often reflects on his own position as a philosopher nearing the end of his life. "I sometimes wonder whether advancing age does not increase our susceptibility to the speechless plea of the dead; the older one grows, the more he is bound to realize that his future is the future of the past—history" (6). In the Introduction to the book Kracauer makes clear that he thinks of history as what he calls an "intermediate area" in the fullest sense of the word. He talks about history as a controversial branch of knowledge, as a highly questionable science, as metaphysical speculation, and even as an art because of its literary qualities. The awkward and curious title of the monograph, therefore, appears at the end of the introduction and can be explained in this context, when Kracauer states that "my goal in doing so is to establish the intermediary area of history as an area in its own right—that of provisional insight into the last things before the last" (16).
 6. The Introduction to *The Last Things* was written between January 1961 and February 1962, according to Paul Oskar Kristeller, who wrote the Foreword to the 1969 Oxford edition. In this Introduction, Kracauer mentions that he thought at first that he "recently discovered" a new interest in history, but that then he "realized in a flash that the many existing parallels between history and the photographic media, historical reality, and camera-reality" were already present in his work as long as forty years ago. "Lately I came across my piece on 'Photography' and was completely amazed at noticing that I had compared historicism with photography already in this article of the twenties" (4).
 7. It is clear that Kracauer's approach to the topics of photography and history has a lot in common with that of Walter Benjamin, a thinker whose ideas were undoubtedly well known to Kracauer. It should be noted, however, that, according to Rodowick, "although Benjamin's thoughts on history may be understood as thoroughly permeating Kracauer's book, Benjamin's voice is still a distant one echoing against the influence of Dilthey and Husserl" (111).

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