

Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 11 (2018)

Records of Contingency: Forms and Media



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doi: [10.12681/syn.20891](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.20891)

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Figures of Chance and Contingency in Albert Kahn's Planetary Project¹

Marion Picker

Abstract

The *Archives de la Planète* is a collection of visual material – about 100 hours of film, 72000 autochromes and 4000 stereoscopic images – established between 1908 and roughly 1932. While the project was of Kahn's inspiration (and also financed by him), the human geographer Jean Brunhes served as its scientific director. Its purpose was to document the diversity, but even more so, the underlying unity of human life and activity all over the globe. It seems thus fitting that Brunhes used a cartographic logic in mapping the “positive facts” of his science, relying on visual documentation. This article examines some of the temporal complexities and contingencies of representation inherent in the autochrome part of the collections. As archives within the archive, they upset the cartographic logic of the project.

“The world is all that is the case” –Wittgenstein's first theorem in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*— constitutes a barely hidden intertext when Horkheimer and Adorno define positivism as “the myth of that which is the case” in the Preface to the 1969 edition of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (XII). What the English language suggests, as an etymological avenue to explore all the way down to the Latin “casus”, is spelled out in the original German text. The “case” that constitutes the world, “Fall” in German, could quite literally be understood as that which *falls*, as that which is generated by chance, or as that which *befalls* on a spatial, temporal, logical and evental order.² Wittgenstein's pronouncement on the “world” could thus be considered as a positivist statement with a twist, and might therefore have been read more favourably by the heralds of critical negativity.³

In this essay however, I will not pursue this particular debate among philosophers, but take the spatial metaphor implicit in the German word “Fall” to a different context, one in which chance and contingency —the former being marked by a vertical movement, the latter implying a relationship of contact and proximity— constitute a central question: namely the documentation and representation of facts. The project of the “Archives de la Planète,” conceived and financed by the French banker and philanthropist Albert Kahn was an endeavour to get hold of a world perceived as global and as one, and in which propositions touch

the reality of the world through visual media. This essay argues that Kahn's archive was intended as a vast collection of the "cases" that make up the world, documented in photographic and cinematic instances of what was considered to be representative. The "cases" would be representative not only in the sense that a part stands in for the whole, but also representative in the sense that the images, if produced through visual media that would be operated with expertise, would be faithful to reality. The project took place between 1908 and 1931, a period in which scientific positivism was met with increasing resistance, challenges and counter-models. Kahn's archive was supposed to sample the "planet" in the form of pictures, still and moving. Today, it still consists of about one hundred hours of film material and 72,000 autochromes —the first generation of genuine colour slides—, plus 4,000 stereoscopic images in black and white.⁴ Thematically diverse, the shots show everyday situations, celebrations and other gatherings, buildings, settlement structures, landscapes, people in traditional costumes and people in work clothing. Kahn's archival enterprise will be examined in the vicinity two projects that challenged established epistemological models in philosophy and geography. Associated with Kahn's projects are the names of Henri Bergson, who as a young man had given Kahn private lessons and remained friends with him, and, still more closely, the human geographer Jean Brunhes, even if what the latter considered as "facts" is not fully congruent with the 'cases' that Kahn's archive could produce, reproduce and preserve.

The difference between the initial idea of the archive (if this idea can be reduced to a certain number of Kahn's declarations), and what eventually emerged in the face of transience and historical contingencies is interesting, not only in its own right. The "Archives de la Planète" can also be compared to other contemporary undertakings with global aspirations such as the Mundaneum of Paul Otlet and Aby Warburg's Library and Atlas Mnemosyne (to mention only two of them) — inasmuch as all of them had their own particular ways of falling short of their original ambitions.⁵ But instead of taking this comparative route, I will focus on the way in which Kahn's a visual archive relates to a particular historical-philosophical strain in human geography which tries to defy transience and chance by reckoning with them.

To begin with, Kahn's archive rests on a very literal understanding of what might be the "case" that figures as its basic category. "Chutes" in French is used to designate both the part of the film that remains unexposed during shooting, while "rushes" designate the working copies that are not incorporated into the final film. Rather non-metaphorically, "chutes" are that which falls under the editing table. I would therefore like to suggest that the fact that in this archive "chutes" and "rushes" are difficult to distinguish from one another is more than a pun —to the

point that a group of researchers associated with the Musée Albert Kahn is still trying to find out whether the films in the archive were edited, and, if so, when, by whom and according to which criteria.⁶ For our current purposes, however, the question is not so much the extent to which the moving image production of the “Archives de la Planète” is the result of technical imperatives or conflicting intentions. Instead, and based on the examination of a small number of autochromes rather than the cinematic production,⁷ I would like to suggest that the status of the accidental itself becomes uncertain in an archive that incorporates, in ways which are still subject to scrutiny, material that might be considered accidental in several respects and to varying degrees.

At least at the level of programmatic declarations, the archive was intended to be inclusive as regards the object of the documentation: the world was to be captured as a coherent and continuous whole —the “planet”; this meant that the diversity documented by the visual material was subordinated to the unity to be represented.⁸ In order to highlight some of the difficulties in putting this ambitious programme into practice, a few explanations on the history of the archives might be helpful. Kahn was first and foremost a financier. After having built his fortune by speculating on South African gold and diamond mines, he founded his own bank and simultaneously launched a series of philanthropic projects. Even if some of them seemed to be primarily scientific, they were ultimately philanthropic, as all of his projects were intended to advance Kahn’s ideal of peace —mostly on a global scale, but also at the level of the French society (for example research in public health and a preventive medicine centre).⁹ The first project that Kahn launched in 1898 was the “Autour du monde” scholarship fund, providing extensive educational trips all over the world for the best French graduates of their year. From 1905 onwards, women and foreign scientists were also allowed to apply. The “Archives de la Planète” constitute a logical continuation of these travel grants. In 1908, during one of his world tours, Kahn drew up a plan for a comprehensive documentation of the earth’s landscape and ethnography. At first, Kahn had his chauffeur Dutertre trained in the operation of photographic and film cameras; shortly afterwards, however, he decided to endow the project with an institutional and scientific framework. Between 1910 and 1912, he looked for a suitable scientific director for the supervision of this comprehensive iconographic documentation. Thanks to his excellent contacts with the Paris educational elite, Kahn also managed to have a chair created at the Collège de France that was to go with the position.

The first candidate Pierre Denis, a former “Autour du monde” scholarship holder, rejected the offer (Bat 146-148). Henri Bergson and the geologist Emmanuel de Margerie —both of whom were to remain associated with the project

as scientific advisors— then contacted Jean Brunhes, a former student of Paul Vidal de la Blache. This geographer was the first professor in France to hold a chair without the double denomination “géographie/histoire” and to open up the discipline of geography towards the study of the interactions between man and environment. Brunhes was not amongst the disciples who have greatly benefitted from Vidal de la Blache’s patronage: his first noteworthy appointment as a university professor led him to Fribourg in Switzerland, and this placed him outside of the networks of the Vidalians dominating the discipline of geography at the time (Clout 373-375). Although shared Vidal de la Blache’s anthropogeographical orientation, he gave it a particular slant. Influenced by German anthropogeography, he introduced the term “human geography” in France. His main work *La géographie humaine* was published in 1910, just in time to make him a likely candidate for directing Kahn’s project.

The letter that de Margerie wrote to Brunhes in January 1912 to present the idea for the “Archives de la Planète” not only explains how Kahn was planning to put his idea into practice, but also mentions the decisive motive for his intention to document the inhabited surface of the world. This is how de Margerie describes Kahn’s intentions: “Stereophotography, projections, and in particular the cinematograph, I want to use all of these means on a large scale to capture once and for all the appearances, the practices and the modalities of human activity that will fatally disappear sooner or later.”¹⁰ The project thus had a planetary dimension: to sample every representative human life form and activity, which is a programme nearly impossible to fulfil, even if it was designed to last a lifetime. In addition to its globe-spanning scope, the “Archives de la Planète” rely on a complex structure of temporal layers. Not only does the initial idea spell out what informs every archive, that is, that the very fact of being incorporated into an archive irremediably alters the existence of any object by putting an end to its “natural” life; it also stresses the desire to give this second, archival life of the object an immutable quality, perhaps bring time itself to a standstill (“once and for all”) and prevent the archival material from circulating in ways that open it up to divergent readings; in short, the desire to protect the archive from the effects of chance. The personal dimension of the archive thus becomes apparent in the quote: it is the result of an enormous ambition, but also the manifestation of an anxiety. Finally, Kahn clearly proves to be a seismograph of modernity, inasmuch as he understands that what makes his project possible in the first place, namely techniques of accelerated transport and communication, threaten something that could be described as tradition, or, if one thinks of the geographical component of the project, cultural systems that were considered to be relatively stable before the onset of industrial modernity. Kahn shared this view with the director-to-be of the “Archives de la Planète” project.

The geographical knowledge conveyed by the project was determined by Brunhes's own version of human geography that he carefully distinguished from ethnography (*Géographie* 753-770; *Ethnographie* 29). According to Kahn, the geographical aspects of the project were part of a holistic education for his contemporary and future political and scientific elites. The "Archives de la Planète" thus follow the same universalising principle that provides the basis of all of Kahn's projects: world peace requires the perception of a spiritual kinship of all people and the possibility of debating and negotiating with one another, as exemplified in the "Comité international de coopération," a branch of the League of Nations Kahn was involved in, at least indirectly (Bretèque 157; Baud-Berthier 106).¹¹ In a world characterised by acceleration and increasingly close contacts between nations and cultures, the concomitant risks had to be balanced by a proportional increase in knowledge as represented by the notion of the archive, a stabilised epistemological counterpart of the network of colonial and commercial relations. In one of his letters to Brunhes from 1912, Kahn singles out a certain affectionate "familiarity" with the planet as a whole as one of the expected outcomes of the "Archives de la Planète." The planet was to become a smaller, more intimate and less threatening place in and through its archival double, as if closeness and miniaturisation could protect it from the incalculable and the unknowable, in short, from contingency:

"On-site studies seem to me to be the only way to practice real geography. They will take all their value and will produce their full effect, and this way, all of our small planet will have become familiar to you."¹² The geographical-ethnological images brought back from the numerous shooting expeditions were shown to groups of scholarship holders, dignitaries, politicians, artists and international celebrities such as Thomas Mann, Albert Einstein and Rabindranath Tagore, at Kahn's estate in Boulogne-Billancourt. The other programmatic use of the autochromes and, very occasionally, film material were Jean Brunhes's courses at the Collège de France and his other lectures.¹³ In spite of our lack of knowledge about the comments and narratives accompanying the semi-private screenings (Beausoleil and Ory, Jean Brunhes 198), the "Archives de la Planète" cannot be conceived of without Brunhes's writings and Kahn's other projects that frame and overdetermine the collections.

All in all, Kahn's and Brunhes's agendas seem to converge, but the geographical and ethnological determination of the framework of the shootings and the collection makes tensions inevitable. As interesting as it would be to single out the divergences between the scientific director and the patron, little is known about manifest conflicts,¹⁴ apart from Kahn's unwillingness to employ professional cameramen and photographers, as Brunhes had initially suggested, and the occasional refusal of travel grants and acquisitions out of financial considerations.

The stock market crash of 1929 precipitated Kahn into bankruptcy and brought about an indefinite hiatus in his projects. The end of the “Archives de la Planète” — at least the phase of missions and active collection building— seemed all the more inevitable because of Brunhes’s death in 1930, although a few smaller missions were still carried out until 1933 (Castro, *Les Archives*, 56).¹⁵ The film material and the 72,000 autochromes could only be saved from being scattered because Kahn himself and some of his influential friends had been able to make sure they were acquired by the Département de la Seine in 1936.

At first glance, it might be tempting to say that the “Archives de la Planète” fits in well with the universal tendencies of their time, also displayed in world fairs and international exhibitions as well as in “global” collections.¹⁶ Contrary to the fairs and exhibitions, however, the “Archives de la Planète” were meant to last, even if this constituted a considerable challenge to preservation, given the ephemeral nature of the film material. Kahn’s collections also differ from other contemporary archives with a global ambition in that they were not open for consultation by a wider public; the group of persons that had regular access to the collections was limited to Kahn himself, Brunhes, and a few employees. Few items were ever lent to other institutions or individuals for screenings; the circulation of archive items outside of Kahn’s inner circle was thus extremely limited. To a certain extent, the “Archives de la Planète” were thus dormant from the very beginning.¹⁷ Even though the collection consisted almost exclusively of visuals, very few were selectively shown in screenings. Moreover, only the spectators of the two basic screening occasions —organised at Kahn’s mansion in Boulogne-Billancourt and at the Collège de France— can be considered to be an audience as such. But even to this limited audience, the projected autochromes did not appear in the framework of a systematic collection, because Brunhes simply did not present the “Archives de la Planète” as such. The archive therefore existed only for an élite that Kahn deemed able to make his vision of world peace come true.¹⁸ After Kahn’s financial collapse, which brought the collections under state ownership, Georges Chevalier, one of the photographers who had worked for Kahn, was appointed head of the archive by the Département de la Seine in 1936.



Fig. 1: Stéphane Passet, Autochrome showing tents and yurts in front of a stupa close to Urga, Mongolia. (inv. A 3984, Collection Archives de la Planète - Musée Albert-Kahn/Département des Hauts-de-Seine, <http://collections.albert-kahn.hauts-de-seine.fr/>).¹⁹

With one assistant (Marguerite Magné de Lalonde, who was to become Chevalier's successor in 1949), little could be done beyond ensuring the material survival of the documents. Until the 1970s, there were neither the personnel to organise exhibitions nor a significant public interest that would have justified the efforts in the eyes of the administration.²⁰ Therefore, due to circumstances and historical contingency, Kahn's archive was hidden away from public view, which was the case anyway from the beginning. Not only was the task to take a snapshot of the planet for future generations entrusted to perishable material that depended, for its mere existence, on the presence or absence of ideal preservation conditions; but also, many autochromes, albeit more robust than the nitrate film stock originally used by Kahn's teams, show signs of deterioration (fig. 1). Thus, the autochromes are perceived as historical documents from a moment distinct and distant from ours. The deterioration, due to flaws in the photographic material or conservation (or both), thus adds an additional temporal dimension, a visible screen between the moment of exposure in the past and the present of the beholder.

The intricate temporal framework of the “Archives de la Planète” has its counterpart in the way in which spatial information is organised to form a visual planetary totality. In their own discreet way, the “Archives de la Planète” share the preservationist impulse with similar projects of nationalist and colonial times trying to capture the world and store it in small boxes. In this particular archive, the exposed autochrome plaques were first transported in special suitcases and then, upon arrival in Boulogne-Billancourt, listed in registries and stored in wooden boxes that were labelled according to the geographical region documented. The world captured in this archival *camera obscura* becomes a portable possession.

One of Kahn’s watchwords was “to organise the future” (Kahn 13)²¹. Only those who take possession of the *imago mundi*, who possess a *Weltbild* in over 72,000 individual images, can claim to take their own fate and that of humanity as a whole into their hands. Given his overall intent, the temporal connotation of vision in Kahn’s thought is significant. Another catchphrase of his was “to see is to foresee” (Kahn 39).²² In Brunhes’s writings as well, statements about seeing are numerous. Both his and Kahn’s enthusiasm for the most recent imaging technologies, as well as their partaking in a context saturated with Bergson’s theorems seems to have made both of them more or less aware of the way in which photographic images, moving and still, upset our conception of time. They make visible that which remains invisible to the naked eye and at the same time conceal, in an excess of visibility, what the gaze desires to see. In Brunhes’s case, the geographer’s desire is to capture “le tout terrestre,” the “terrestrial whole” that requires an educated gaze in order to be seen.

In his main work *Géographie Humaine*, published just before accepting the position of scientific director for Kahn, Brunhes reveals that despite his positivist diction (he speaks of “positive facts”²³), he is guided by a vitalist idea, which creates a certain ambivalence vis-à-vis the programmatic subtitle of the book: “An attempt at a positive classification, principles and examples.”²⁴ Brunhes’s concept of the “terrestrial whole” is based on the highly speculative “principle of interconnexion” (18, English translation 13).²⁵ The latter replaces the idea of simple causality, justified to a certain degree to explain facts of physical geography, with the idea that every fact is contingent on a variety of variable factors which it is likely to modify in its turn. For Brunhes, the observation of an isolated phenomenon, but also a simple series of observations are insufficient as methods of human geography; rather, each finding should be weighed against a contiguous series of observations. In his explanation of “connexité,” the “principle of interconnexion,” Brunhes repeatedly uses German terminology, such as “Pflanzenverein” (“plant association”) —a term borrowed from the Danish botanist Eugenius Warming to

underline not only the physiognomic, but also the spatial aspect of the affinities between different plants that form recurrent groups and hence contribute to shaping characteristic landscapes (22; English translation 17).²⁶ In Brunhes's conception of human geography, which also has to take into account the complexities of psychology,²⁷ "... the endeavour to connect the phenomena with each other, and thus to reduce the part that must be assigned to pure chance, is to *explain*" (29, English translation 25; emphasis in the original). When viewed in isolation, geographical phenomena appear to be random, the result of mere chance; however, if they are examined in their multi-dimensional context, a web of reciprocal causalities appears in the place of fortuity (cf. 30, English translation 25). That which defines the interrogations as specifically geographic is their frame of reference, nothing less than the entire earth, in the form of "soil": soil types, erosion, hydrography, historical forms of settlement, forms of human coexistence etc. (31, English translation 25). The consideration of the surface of the earth from all possible angles gives rise to the idea of the "terrestrial whole": every force or phenomenon that can be observed is connected with every other one; everything is connected with everything else, so that the earth itself finally appears as a living being, as an organism. However, Brunhes shies away from this last consequence and contents himself with seeing only an organic metaphor at work here (33).²⁸ And yet this metaphor of the earth-organism betrays a view that considers chance as an effect of non-knowledge, likely to disappear once the complex planetary web of causalities has replaced contingency. Much like Kahn's, Brunhes's chance is thus something to be "eliminated."²⁹

"Ne voit pas qui veut": roughly "wanting to see is not enough"; according to Brunhes, in order to look at the world, the geographer, or the observer in general, needs to be trained so as to seize that which escapes mere chance, yet converges with other facts and might put the observer on track to discern regularities and find explanations. Brunhes's daughter, who used to assist him and later became an ethnographer, remembered the importance of the "selective gaze" (Brunhes-Delamarre and Beausoleil 105). Brunhes, who had already gained considerable experience as a photographer for his own publications in the years before 1910, not only took over part of the technical training of the photographers and cameramen employed for the missions, he also instructed them on the principles of human geography, so that they were able to follow the specific guidelines of the "Archives de la Planète" even when travelling without anyone to supervise their shootings (Beausoleil and Ory, Albert Kahn 190).³⁰ Most importantly, they were encouraged to outsmart chance by reckoning with it; landscapes and humans were to be captured at their most casual, so to speak, to the extent the imaging techniques allowed it. This aspect of Brunhes's method to obtain a "scientific" result differs

from other approaches that fully adhere to what has been identified as the “mechanic” or “non-interventionist” paradigm of objectivity by Daston and Galison (121). One of the features of this paradigm —the moral struggle against the “inner enemy” of subjectivity with its arbitrary preferences (121)— does not seem to apply to Brunhes’s missions. The struggle for objectivity is replaced by a photographic subjectivity that knows what to select when it comes to capturing the diversity of the world in its innermost coherence, and, what is more, knowing this in a movement of intuitive anticipation.

Precisely because of the emphasis on education and training —manifesting itself differently in Kahn’s and Brunhes’s approaches to the “Archives de la Planète”— the collection can be described as a picture atlas, and justifiably so because the cartographical element is present as well (Castro, *La pensée*). The missions took place in about 60 countries (on the basis of today’s frontiers). The routes to be taken by the crews were carefully planned using the latest ordnance survey maps, which Brunhes had access to thanks to his far-reaching contacts within the military and the colonial apparatus. The photographers were instructed to carefully record the date, location and subject of the autochromes with the consecutive number in a central log of the mission —in a way, each image was thus geotagged. It is true, the project was far from being complete at the moment of Brunhes’s death and Kahn’s bankruptcy, but the basic idea mirrors the structure of an atlas: the exhaustive documentation of the ethnographical and geographical givens of all the regions of the world would have as its final point a new, albeit virtual, world map intended to foreground the underlying coherence of all human life forms.

Picture atlases as well as geographical atlases of the early 20th century not only continue a nineteenth-century educational practice —Brunhes himself developed a textbook for geography lessons— they also echo the early modern period, when iconographic material was directly integrated into maps. Apart from the main goal, the becoming-apparent of the “terrestrial whole,” a significant aesthetic side-effect was produced by the “Archives de la Planète,” despite the virtual grid and coordinates in its cartographic arrangement. Not accidentally, Alexander von Humboldt, the author of the last, belated cosmography (entitled *Kosmos*), was one of Brunhes’s methodological references in *La Géographie humaine* (22, English translation 16).

Despite certain measures to increase the “everyday” aspect of the documents to be created, Brunhes, somewhat ironically, adheres to the ideal of non-interventionist objectivity (Daston and Galison 120) inasmuch as fulfilling the educational task of the archive-to-be is based on the mechanical recording of individual phenomena. His method of tracking down the “meaning” of the planet from a geographical point of view could be described as an attempt to circumscribe

the effects of chance. Kahn's general stipulation that chance be eliminated (Kahn 39) had to be modified in the face of technological challenges: Brunhes depended on newly invented imaging techniques that imposed their own laws; the photographers and cameramen were still experimenting with the possibilities and shortcomings of the media used. The film sequences at the beginning of the project before the First World War were still relatively short; the filmstrips conveyed by hand crank registered even the slightest fluctuations in crank speed. Moreover, autochromes were another invention of the Lumière brothers, commercialised in 1907 and thus brand-new at the time. As their name implies, autochromes are genuine colour photographs (i.e. not tinted), the first of their kind that were commercially viable. Interestingly, the key element of the process was potato starch. The Lumière brothers never revealed the exact recipe, but their technique makes use of the fact that potato starch grains have the right diameter and can easily be dyed because they are transparent. In order to make use of the additive process, this is done in equal parts for each of the primary colours orange red, green, and violet blue. Instead of screwing colour filters in front of the lens, they are incorporated into the material support of the autochrome—in fact, millions of filters: a very thin layer of dyed starch, as thin as the diameter of one grain, is applied to the glass plate, together with carbon powder to obdurate the interstices. Then, a light-sensitive layer of a silver bromide gelatine emulsion is added. In order to obtain an autochrome positive, the exposed plate has to be developed twice. After the first development, the image is fixed, but as a colour negative: where light traversed orange grains, for example, the plate has blackened.

The advantage of this process is the quality of the colours. One of the autochromes taken by Stéphane Passet on the 1913 voyage to India (fig. 2) is particularly interesting in this respect. To be sure, it is noteworthy for several other reasons; first of all, the frontal display that is common in group photos of the "Archives de la Planète" takes on a different quality, given the objectifying "scientific" gaze in a colonial context. The persons in the picture are photographed because they are representative of a social category; they are made to display their clothing, hairstyle, jewellery etc. that places them within that category. The subject header, "nudity," even though it may have been added later, says more about Western society than about those in front of the lens.³¹ Thanks to the powerful natural light, the autochrome has a confusingly good quality, rather unexpected in images that are more than a century old. But it is not only the quality that places the present-day beholder at an uncertain distance from those portrayed. Precisely because of her or his lack of knowledge about potential changes in traditional attire, the viewer cannot situate the scene on a timeline. Despite some traces of

material aging, the image has a surreal quality that makes it difficult to place it in 1913.

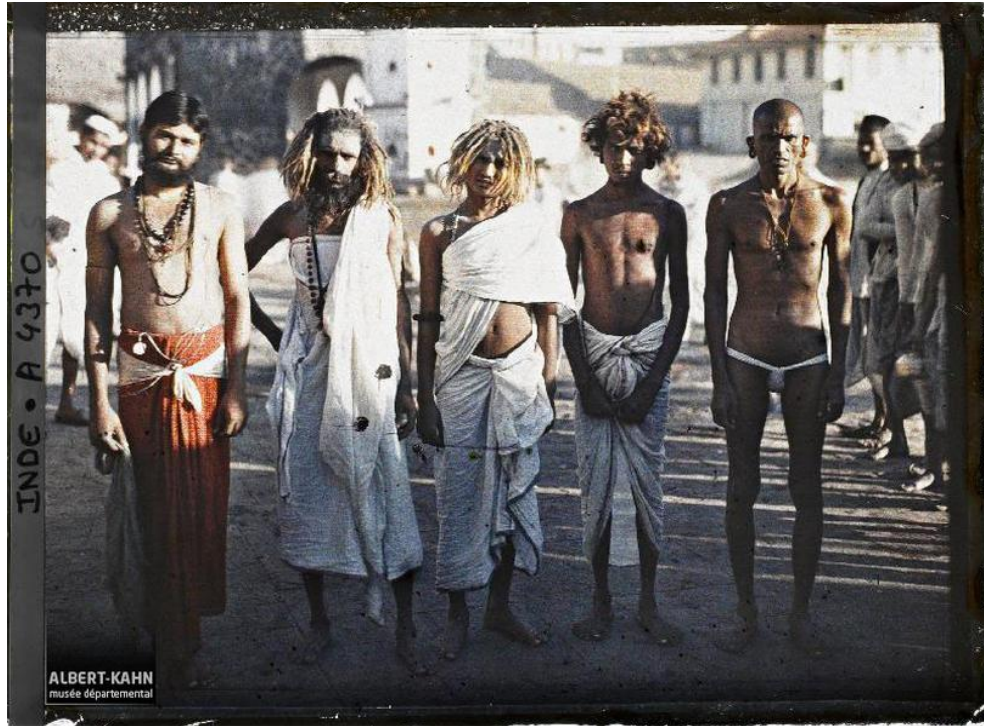


Fig. 2: Stéphane Passet, “Groupe de Brahmanes et Fakirs,” December 17, 1913, Mumbai, India. (inv. A 4370 S, Collection Archives de la Planète - Musée Albert-Kahn/Département des Hauts-de-Seine, <http://collections.albert-kahn.hauts-de-seine.fr/>)

Although convenient in comparison to filming, the disadvantages of the autochrome technique are obvious. The equipment, also counting the suitcases in which the glass plates were transported, was heavy and often had to be transported in difficult terrain. Pastel shades, the characteristic autochrome veil, are produced by diffuse light, which is common in Western Europe. Moreover, the material is very insensitive and requires long exposure times. Therefore, in landscape photography the vegetation frequently appears blurred, even when winds are light. This characteristic turns out to be particularly problematic when taking pictures of people (fig. 3), especially children and animals. This feature of autochrome photography produces a peculiar effect: to the Western eye, the relationship between “nearby” and “far away” —both in a spatial and in a temporal perspective— is subject to a reversal. The autochrome taken by Stéphane Passet in the Netherlands in 1929 (fig. 4) is perfectly analogous in purpose and presentation to the shot he took sixteen years earlier in Mumbai: both show apparently

homogeneous groups, all members of the same gender, in everyday attire and in their usual surroundings. However, in comparison, the autochrome taken on the island of Marken close to Amsterdam makes evident the historical distance that separates today's beholder from the subject. One could attach the label "folkloristic" to the image showing four women in traditional clothing in front of a shop; after all, the "Archives de la Planète" were meant to document ways of living that were in danger of disappearing. But the ethnographic gaze at work only increases the impression of temporal and spatial distance.



Fig. 3: Stéphane Passet, "Subjects: Family, Flower, Flowering Meadow," May 1929, close to Saint-Yrieix-la-Perche, France. (inv. A 71921, Collection Archives de la Planète - Musée Albert-Kahn/Département des Hauts-de-Seine, <http://collections.albert-kahn.hauts-de-seine.fr/>).

Yet nowhere is the reversal of spatio-temporal cardinal points more visible than in the shots closest to home. The French autochromes have the strongest tendency to switch categories, from ethnographical record to historical document. We may consider an autochrome that strangely resembles a snapshot and shows a family in a springtime meadow; the landscape may look timelessly familiar to Western European eyes, but the size of the family and its staging within the photograph are historically connoted. Last but not least, even if nothing else were to guide the present-day beholder, the fashionable attire worn by the persons portrayed allows

us to date the picture rather accurately in the 1920s. Moreover, the impression of distance is enhanced by the fact that the faces appear blurred.



Fig. 4: Stéphane Passet, Four women in local dress. September 29, 1929, Marken, Netherlands. (inv. A 61919, Collection Archives de la Planète - Musée Albert-Kahn/Département des Hauts-de-Seine, <http://collections.albert-kahn.hauts-de-seine.fr/>).

Trond Lundemo has pointed out that the imaging processes as well as the basic conception of the archive favour a ghostlike appearance of those represented in the autochromes (216). In the logic of the archive, they were doomed to disappear with their culture, and this was precisely the reason why their photo was being taken. Thus their demise is inscribed into the image. But not just the subjects photographed might be considered as revenants; the autochromes as well exist in two versions, each of which (Vasak/Jung/Lemaître), becomes significant when the two slightly different takes are viewed alternately, thus creating a semblance of an arrested circular movement. Because of the imponderables of the technique, the subject was always photographed a second time, but frequently the second glass plate was not developed a second time if the first autochrome turned out to be satisfactory. These preserved “colour negatives” were kept in boxes labelled “to be developed”; they were placed at the margins of the archive: not quite in, not quite out. As it has already been pointed out for the film “chutes,” a systematic

elimination of “poor” takes does not seem to have taken place in the “Archives de la Planète.”³² But regardless of this ruse, to overcome the risk of accidental loss by taking and storing doubles, another attempt at escaping chance, seems to be significant for the question of contingency in the archive.

This attempt was, accidentally, documented on a few autochromes from one of the first missions. In 1913, Brunhes personally directed the shootings on the voyage that led him and photographer Auguste Léon to Montenegro. It happened that Brunhes got caught on an autochrome himself while he was giving instructions to a man in preparation for a portrait (fig. 5), thus documenting the process of documentation.



Fig. 5: Auguste Léon, Brunhes and a seated man. October 23, 1913, Cetinje, Montenegro (inv. A 2931, Collection Archives de la Planète - Musée Albert-Kahn/Département des Hauts-de-Seine, <http://collections.albert-kahn.hauts-de-seine.fr/>).

Brunhes’s angular gesture, his forearms and hands held upright and imitating the picture frame, draws our attention to the characteristic edges of the autochrome. They appear as a contact zone of the starch grains that were exposed and those that remained unexposed rather than a neat line between that which is “in” and that which is “out” of the documentation. The edges of the autochrome are a privileged gateway for material deterioration; in short, a zone of contingency.

Still, Brunhes's gesture signals a containment and thus quite the opposite; it prepares the man for the apparatus that was to hand him over to eternity —after all, Kahn had made it clear in his programmatic statement for the archive that the documentation was meant to be carried through “once and for all.” For this reason, Paula Amad has described the “Archives de la Planète” as the “bunker of civilization” (Counter Archive 292), and this also sums up the apocalyptic stance of the project. Both Kahn and Brunhes —the latter in the field of geographical knowledge— cast man as “master of his own fate,” “*maître de son destin*” (Perlès). But the rescue of phenomena that they were both committed to takes the form of a miniaturisation, a picture atlas to be completed and perfected in the long run. Seen this way, the principle of “interconnexion” could also be understood as an increasingly close-meshed network of cartographic coordinates, making it possible to zoom in and out or to switch between scales. The correspondence between macro and microcosm, reminiscent of the cartographic meditations of the early modern period (Lestringant), is clearly a part of Kahn's convictions, as evidenced in the 1926 addition of Jean Comandon's biological laboratory and his microcinematographical records to Kahn's projects (Beausoleil and Ory, Albert Kahn 52).³³ However, the categories and coordinates of the archival project itself were subject to change when the open collection turned into a closed one with Brunhes's death and Kahn's bankruptcy, and even more so when the archive as such —and not only the items stored in it— became the object of scientific interest. The framework of the inquiry itself has shifted, so that the question of the scale and scope of the documentary impulse seems to be central now, making it possible to question the apparent material homogeneity of the archive. Is it the photographic images or the objects that constitute its material support, the documents or the facts documented therein, or finally the planet? To what degree could an autochrome, with its distribution of exposed colour grains, be considered as an image of an archive, an archive within an archive? Could one therefore speak of a “distributed archive” (Edwards)?

Seeing it all without being seen —it might be tempting to compare Kahn to the modern version of an absolutist prince in his map room, but one has to carefully point out the differences as well. Kahn, just like Brunhes, might have been filmed or photographed accidentally, but he made a point of never being portrayed.³⁴ As a Jew in the era of the Dreyfus campaign, beyond all questions of personal preferences, he had other reasons for keeping a low profile and must have been acutely aware of the problems of public exposure, of being seen. This might be one of the reasons why Kahn was reluctant to employ professional press photographers for his project, preferring to have his own crew trained by the scientific director of the project. The visuals established according to the recording guidelines of the

“Archives de la Planète,” however, still do not obey just one single programme. They unfold their own life —perhaps more aptly described as a *survival*; they produce their own unforeseeable, disorienting effects, precisely because Brunhes’s approach favoured everyday situations, unsensational and anonymous non-events. Take, for example, the expanse of a Mongolian meadow, the wasteland of an industrial landscape, the emptiness of a desert road in what was then “Persia”: even with the entry in the central registry attaching spatiotemporal coordinates to each shot, the autochromes produce a disorienting effect. Although many of them may have been taken on the occasion of invitations or political events (especially in France), they are marked by a lack of *histoire événementielle*, evental history (Amad, Counter Archive 259) —which, with a grain of salt (Carbonell), passes as the historiographic version of scientific positivism. Instead, the image production gives preference to the steady flow of quotidian, regular, unexceptional situations —but it should be noted that the “everyday” in itself is not a safeguard: not against brute empiricism,³⁵ not against the event as accident, and not against manipulations. As we have seen, the anticipated quotidian effect comes at the price of interventions at several levels. These interventions can be subtly ideological or contingent on the possibilities the most recent recording media offered, or both. The constructed “everyday” introduces an uncanny quality to the autochromes, viewed from the distance of roughly one hundred years: that which is supposed to be familiar, close or “known,” captured in the adjacent grains of the autochromes, the cartographical grid, and the classificatory system of human geography, appears as lost —in the double sense of “being impossible to locate” and “dead.” Both Kahn and Brunhes seem to have been aware of the contingencies not only of building, organising and preserving a collection, but also of controlling its function, scope and meaning —which might have been the reason for the anxiety that transpires in some of their declarations. The “Archives de la Planète” thus partake in the fall from grace of representation and documentation in the social sciences, still in their youth at the beginning of the twentieth century. But they are also an expression of and a response to the larger crisis of representation that affects all aspects of society —class, gender, the unity of the self, the nation, and the world, literature and the arts—, a crisis which is precipitated by the possibilities and side effects of the new media of reproduction and communication. Therefore, it might be insufficient to retrace the epistemology operated by the archive without paying close attention to its poetics of knowledge —beyond Brunhes’s conceptual metaphors.

To remember Hamlet, it could be said that in the archival images not only “time” but also space “is out of joint” (act I scene 5, 188). A rescued image might be one that poses new questions; that can create new contexts. The indexical logic that

creates “positive facts,” and which here has a cartographic manifestation, is undone time and again by the archive, every time the archive enters new constellations. The autochromes of the Musée Albert Kahn, even more than the film recordings, show that the historical indexes these images carry with them are neither identical to their location on a timeline, nor to a cartography of time, but refer to a vertiginous loss of that which the image as a contingent object tries to encapsulate: the world of the past.

¹ Research for this article was supported by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions which have allowed me to rethink certain aspects of this text. All errors and shortcomings are of course mine.

² Although this might be an interesting secondary aspect, the “fall” associated with original sin and its disruption of divine order is not included in the present discussion.

³ Adorno’s judgement of Wittgenstein was more nuanced at other moments. In what has come to be called the “Positivismusstreit,” Adorno refers to Wittgenstein as “der reflektierteste Positivist,” “the most reflecting of all positivists” (8).

⁴ Cf. for example <http://collections.albert-kahn.hauts-de-seine.fr/?page=accueil>. The information on the number of surviving items varies slightly, depending on the source.

⁵ While Otlet’s project aimed at archiving “the world” by creating a universal bibliographical repertory and classification system (cf. Otlet; Krajewski), Warburg’s library and his “Atlas Mnemosyne” project were to provide an archive of cultural memory, focusing on documents and photographed objects from European and Near Eastern cultural history but also including material from New Mexico. Still, the universal scope of Warburg’s archive becomes apparent in its combination of an anthropological dimension and its atlas structure rather than in its material.

⁶ Cf. Quentin Gassiat’s interview with Anne Sigaud: <https://qgdesartistes.fr/anne-sigaud-les-archives-de-la-planete/>. Lundemo argues that the inherent editing practice of the archive corresponds to a “montage at a distance,” or, in Harun Farocki’s words, “soft montage”: the archived film material (but also, crossing media types, the autochromes) contains editing potentials that wait for future action (209).

⁷ Paula Amad has extensively dealt with the documentary value of the “everyday” scenes that were included in the Archive’s film material.

⁸ Lundemo draws our attention to the fact that the object of Kahn’s collection is not film (nor autochromes, one may add), but the visible surface of the planet (209).

⁹ For an in-depth discussion of Kahn’s diverse projects, see Beausoleil and Ory, Albert Kahn.

¹⁰ “La photographie stéréoscopique, les projections, le cinématographe surtout, voilà ce que je voudrais faire fonctionner en grand afin de fixer une fois pour toutes des aspects, des pratiques et des modes de l’activité humaine dont la disparition fatale n’est plus qu’une question de temps.”

Albert Kahn, cited by Emmanuel de Margerie in a letter to Jean Brunhes (January 26, 1912), cited in Beausoleil and Ory, Jean Brunhes 92, (my translation). Albert Kahn shares his worries with one of the leading ethnographers of his day, Adolf Bastian, who —according to

Ernst Gombrich— warned that time was running out for conducting field research in certain areas (166-167).

¹¹ Kahn's friend and mentor Bergson became the first president of the "Comité international de coopération," a predecessor to the UNESCO.

¹² "Les études sur place me paraissent être le seul moyen de faire de la vraie géographie. Elles prendront toute leur valeur et produiront leur plein effet et ainsi toute notre petite planète vous sera devenue familière. Albert Kahn, cited in Marie Bonhomme et Mariel Jean Brunhes Delamarre, "Le champ du monde," (Beausoleil and Ory, Jean Brunhes 183, my translation).

¹³ There are significant traces of the material shown. Cf. for example the list of autochromes projected on the occasion of a talk he gave in Madrid on May 10, 1917, <http://14-18.albert-kahn.hauts-de-seine.fr/comprendre/des-images-au-service-de-la-nation?showall=&start=2>.

¹⁴ Cf. the indication of diverging interests, <http://collections.albert-kahn.hauts-de-seine.fr/?page=themes&sub=portraitDeGroupe>; also cf. Beausoleil and Ory, Albert Kahn 190.

¹⁵ Slightly different dates for the last operations are given by Couëtoux (11).

¹⁶ Twenty-four international expositions took place between 1851 and 1906. One also has to add colonial expositions and other fairs (Beausoleil and Ory, Jean Brunhes 21). One could call the overarching impulse "Weltprojekte," literally: "world projects" (Krajewski).

¹⁷ This changed when the archive was gradually transformed into a museum.

¹⁸ Paula Amad therefore quite aptly speaks of a "sanctuary" (Amad, Cinema's sanctuary 138-159).

¹⁹ This and all the other autochromes reproduced in this article can be accessed through the portal <http://collections.albert-kahn.hauts-de-seine.fr/>, conforming to the collection's terms and conditions for non-commercial uses.

²⁰ With Jeanne Beausoleil, who succeeded Marguerite Magné de Lalonde in 1974, a successful campaign to valorize the collections began.

²¹ "organiser l'avenir."

²² "voir, c'est prévoir."

²³ "faits positifs."

²⁴ The subtitle seems to have disappeared from the third edition in French (1925). "Essai de classification positive, principes et exemples."

²⁵ "Interconnexion" is the term used by Le Compte in the English translation.

²⁶ Warming cited in Brunhes 22 (English translation 17).

²⁷ The third part of chapter IX is devoted to "Le facteur psychologique," with explicit references to Bergson's definition of the "direction of the attention." Cf. also Berdoulay 61.

²⁸ The English translation does not follow the original closely here.

²⁹ One of Kahn's best-known phrases is "il faut supprimer le hasard," "chance must be eliminated" (39).

³⁰ Gilles Baud-Berthier points out that not all of the approximately fifteen photographers were willing or able to closely follow Brunhes's directives (107).

³¹ <http://collections.albert-kahn.hauts-de-seine.fr/?page=themes&sub=portraitDeGroupe>.

³² The systematicity of keeping or discarding material in the „Archives de la Planète“ is the object of current research at the Musée Albert Kahn (oral communication by Anne Sigaud, April 30, 2018).

³³ Jean Comandon produced a number of films documenting the movements of micro-organisms as well as plant development for Charles Pathé and —after 1926— for Kahn.

³⁴ The one notable exception being the well-known photo showing him at the window in his office. <http://albert-kahn.hauts-de-seine.fr/> ("Portrait" in the right-hand panel).

³⁵ It is interesting to note here that the *Annales* generation following Fernand Braudel favoured statistical series ("histoire sérielle") that were to capture that which corresponded to the "average," sometimes forgetting the "problematic" angle championed by Lucien Febvre.

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