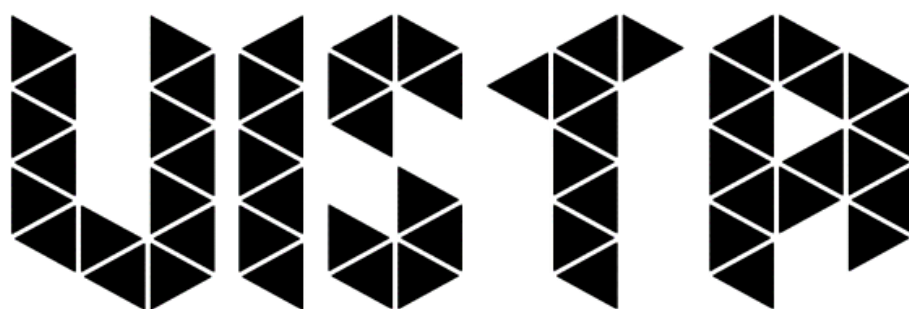




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Absent Bodies, Suspended Memories Corpos Ausentes, Memórias Suspensas

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ABSENT BODIES, SUSPENDED MEMORIES

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates how the tension between presence and absence reveals the role of images in the production of space and memory, and in the administration of the sensible, at the Morro Velho mine in Nova Lima (Minas Gerais, Brazil). Drawing on a photograph of a former changing room, it analyses how visual framings, captions, and curatorial choices produce regimes of visibility that naturalise the erasure of the bodies that sustained extractive activity grounded in colonial and capitalist logics. Mobilising Benjamin, Butler, Azoulay, Lefebvre, Federici, and Graeber, the text proposes “thinking through images” to show how the scene — saturated with objects and emptied of workers — operates a politics of absence, in which both productive labour and the reproductive labour that sustains it are removed from the field of appearance. The changing room emerges as a liminal space whose material traces function as phantasmagorias and agents of memory, enabling the formulation of questions that disrupt the museological framing and reopen the history of mining through a critical lens. By treating the image as a complex artefact, the article demonstrates how official narratives silence lives that were essential to the local economy while also indicating that these lives resist and insist on reappearing as traces and possibilities. Excavating these images becomes a political gesture of historical reinscription that challenges documentary neutrality, reactivating erased tensions, and proposing other ways of seeing and recognising the lives that sustained both productive and reproductive labour, yet remain invisibilised within institutional memory.

KEYWORDS

image, memory, traces, mining, Morro Velho mine

CORPOS AUSENTES, MEMÓRIAS SUSPENSAS

RESUMO

Esse artigo investiga como a tensão entre presença e ausência revela os modos pelos quais imagens participam da produção do espaço, da memória e da administração do sensível no contexto da mineração aurífera da mina do Morro Velho, em Nova Lima (Minas Gerais, Brasil). A partir da fotografia de um antigo vestiário, é analisado como enquadramentos visuais, legendas e escolhas curatoriais produzem regimes de visibilidade que naturalizam o apagamento dos corpos que sustentaram a atividade extrativista de base colonial e capitalista. Mobilizando Benjamin, Butler, Azoulay, Lefebvre, Federici e Graeber, o texto propõe “pensar por imagens” para mostrar como a cena saturada de objetos e esvaziada de trabalhadores opera uma política da ausência, na qual tanto o trabalho produtivo quanto o trabalho reprodutivo que o sustenta são retirados do campo de aparição. O vestiário surge como espaço liminar cujos vestígios materiais funcionam como fantasmagorias e agentes de memória, permitindo formular perguntas que desobedecem ao enquadramento museal e reabrem a história da mineração pela via crítica. Ao tratar a imagem como artefato complexo, o artigo evidencia como a narrativa oficial silencia vidas que foram essenciais para a economia local e, ao mesmo tempo, indica que elas resistem e insistem em reaparecer como rastro e possibilidade. Escavar essas imagens torna-se gesto político de reinscrição histórica, capaz de desafiar a neutralidade documental, reativar tensões apagadas e propor outros modos de ver e reconhecer as vidas que sustentaram o trabalho produtivo e reprodutivo, mas que permanecem invisibilizadas na memória institucional.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

imagem, memória, vestígios, mineração, mina do Morro Velho

INTRODUCTION

This article presents a critical analysis of photography as a complex artefact. By articulating concepts from philosophy, image theory, and studies on labour and memory, and drawing on a case study of the Morro Velho mine, we aim to contribute to debates on visibility and erasure within culture and institutional memory. In this work, we bring together authors such as Angus (2024), Butler (2009/2015), Benjamin (1982/2021), Azoulay (2019/2024), Lefebvre (1974, 1980/1983), and Federici (2012/2019) to propose a diverse theoretical framework for the analysis of interrelated images. Our main argument here is that photography, particularly in the context under analysis, should be understood as an artefact that participates in the production of regimes of visibility and of politics of absence. We demonstrate how visual framings, captions, and curatorial choices function as mechanisms that naturalise the erasure of bodies and experiences of the many workers who sustained mining activity in the context under study, in both production and reproduction.

The main contribution proposed here lies in articulating these authors’ thinking through images, or thinking with images, as a critical method. The approach we advance demonstrates how images operate politically in the production and distribution of memory and of the sensible. In this way, it becomes possible to destabilise the institutional narratives produced and to reinscribe erased subjects, intentionally left out yet fundamental to

their consolidation. The work therefore intervenes in debates on visual culture, extractivism, and archives, insofar as we shift the focus from the image as document to treating it as a field of dispute.

Some studies on mining memory and visual culture still privilege heritage and documentary approaches, often treating photography as neutral evidence of the past. In contrast, this article investigates how images participate in the production of space, memory, and the administration of the sensible in the context of Brazilian gold mining and, more precisely, in the context of mined territories¹. By analysing a photograph displayed in a private memory centre, we interrogate how visual compositions, museological discourses, and curatorial choices produce intelligibilities and framings that naturalise the erasure of the lives that sustained an extractive activity grounded in colonial and capitalist logics.

The focus of the analysis is the Morro Velho mine, one of the oldest gold mines in the country (dating back to the early 18th century) and whose trajectory was directly intertwined with the urban development of the Raposos and Nova Lima region, in Minas Gerais, Brazil. Slave labour was mobilised from the very beginning of its mining operations and, even after the formal abolition of slavery, the organisation of labour continued to establish extremely precarious safety conditions, along with punishments, political persecution, and distinctions between Brazilian and foreign workers (Grossi, 1981). Therefore, although this mining complex has been integrated into various Brazilian political and economic configurations to date, it may be analysed through a foundational logic of foreign-capital dominance and multidimensional violence.

In this context, photography becomes a starting point for understanding how visual representations are mobilised to construct official narratives that silence bodies, experiences, and conflicts, while simultaneously organising what can or cannot be acknowledged as part of history. In other words, in this work, as discussed by Azoulay (2019/2024) and Butler (2009/2015), we understand photography as an apparatus that mobilises epistemological dimensions (as it enables the interrogation of knowledge production), ethical dimensions (since it involves responsibility, in moral and social terms, concerning the production, manipulation, and circulation of representations), and political dimensions (as it holds the potential to shape the perception of reality and reorient narratives). From this perspective, we seek to analyse how these images intervene in and shape the production of regimes of visibility and the construction of urban memory. The mobilisation of this theoretical framework has highlighted how photography can intervene in narrative disputes in the context of mining at Morro Velho.

As will be detailed below, this article is organised around images that structure distinct analytical moments. These images refer, in some way, to a former changing room at the Morro Velho mine, marked by the absence of the bodies that sustained mining labour. The photographic record itself already implies framing choices and, therefore, disputes between presence and erasure. Furthermore, as they are embedded within a

¹ In dialogue with Ferrari and Fontes (2023), we adopt a shift from the term “mining municipalities/territories” to “mined municipalities/territories”, in order to highlight the extractive nature of the processes to which they are subjected and to challenge the notion of an intrinsic availability associated with mining-related practices.

museological space, these images undergo curatorial operations that reconfigure and institutionalise meanings, reinforcing or challenging regimes of visibility. Methodologically, the analysis mobilises traces and material residues to tension the official narrative and reopen questions about memory, labour, and invisibilisation. In this sense, like the fireflies theorised by Didi-Huberman (2009/2011), these images that mark absences are mobilised as presences capable of casting flashes onto the horizon of destruction, restoring some visibility to memories and spaces haunted by capital.

METHODOLOGY

The writing is organised around three interrelated analytical moments, linked by two images and by a single critical exercise. This methodological structure is designed to track a photograph's shifts across different temporalities, materialities, and regimes of circulation, allowing us to understand how meanings related to labour, memory, and mining are produced, stabilised, and contested over time. Rather than treating the image as a document, we analyse it as a visual, political, and epistemological artefact whose intelligibility varies with its framings, modes of display, and conditions of reading.

The decision to structure the analysis into three distinct moments responds directly to the research question guiding this study: how do images participate in the production of regimes of visibility that naturalise the erasure of lives connected to mining? This methodological division allows us to observe how such erasure operates across different layers of the image and its circulation. Each analytical moment thus highlights a specific dimension of the relationship among photography, memory, and extractivism, while preserving the analysis's critical continuity.

First, we engage with two images. The initial photograph, titled "Antigo Vestiário" (Former Changing Room), depicts hanging clothes, boots, and chains forming a transitional space emptied of subjects. Its analysis allows us to examine how the absence of bodies operates visually in the production of a memory of mining labour. The second image concerns the exhibition context of the first, displayed at the AngloGold Ashanti Memory Centre, where captions, curatorial framing, and museography reconfigure its reading and participate in the organisation of an institutional regime of appearance. The analysis thus shifts from the internal composition of the photograph to its conditions of circulation and institutionalisation, enabling an understanding of how archives and museum dispositifs contribute to stabilising particular narratives of mining, progress, and labour.

As a method, we adopt a curatorial exercise that formulates direct questions to the image. This gesture seeks to suspend automatised ways of seeing, to practise unlearning (Azoulay, 2019/2024), and to subject the photograph to an interpretative regime that reintroduces conflict, memory, and historicity, contributing to the reopening of history (Benjamin, 1982/2021). By addressing images through three guiding questions, we can understand how photography participates in the production of regimes of visibility and the politics of absence across different scales. By following the image under varying conditions of framing, circulation, and materiality, the methodology demonstrates

that visual archives and museological dispositifs do not merely record the world of mining, but actively organise forms of recognition, memory, and historicity. The relevance of these three analytical moments lies precisely in their capacity to trace how the image's meanings are produced, institutionalised, and subsequently contested, thereby enabling an understanding of visuality as a historical and political process rather than a fixed representation.

EXTRACTIVE VISUALITY AND THE MATERIALITY OF THE IMAGE

Mining was among the earliest technical activities to be systematically represented in visual culture (Sekula, 1983). In the American context, this representation materialised in travellers' accounts and corporate ventures that sought to export an image of progress. Given the centrality of mining–colonial exploitation in the development of global capitalism, operating as a motor of primitive accumulation and as the genesis of the modern world (Aráoz, 2020), we understand it as constituting an intense laboratory of visual dispute. Articulated within a regime of circulation of programmed images, photographic technology projected mining onto a global scale, while simultaneously assigning local territories a purely mineral condition. This gives rise to what Siobhan Angus (2024) terms an “extractive gaze”, a way of seeing that reduces nature and human labour to resources for exploitation. Thus, colonial–capitalist extractive mining operates not only on land but also on bodies, subjectivities, and social memories (Aráoz, 2020).

The relationship between mining and photography exceeds any immediate association. The emergence of mechanical photography, together with its subsequent uses, allows it to be framed as a technology intrinsic to the capitalist ecosystem. By depicting technical progress, the visual archive reinforced capitalist domination over nature and human labour, tending to suppress living labour and replace the worker's body with a static, lifeless objectivity (Sekula, 1983). Beyond operating within these regimes of visibility and invisibility, photography asserts itself as a physical object, constituted by materialities extracted from the earth. Mining itself is an absolutely necessary precondition for photography to exist as a medium, so that the history of the latter is therefore deeply imbricated with geology and minerals, as well as with labour, property, art, and colonisation (Angus, 2024).

Thus, the historical trajectory of photography and mining reveals that the technical image is intimately implicated in systems of destruction. In this context, mining companies rely on the construction of their own archives and the circulation of images as a vector of accumulation by dispossession. This entails the mobilisation of a deliberate function of visual culture, in which the encouragement of extraction and the attraction of capital become the image's primary purpose (Angus, 2024).

However, it is possible to discern an analytical opening in which the same minerals that generate environmental harm through enabling photography may be redirected to document this very exploitation within a broader chain (Angus, 2024). In other words, from this materiality, it becomes possible to occupy a productive position from which to mobilise critique. Thus, rather than merely endorsing a unidirectional world driven by

progress, photography can render visible precisely that which capitalist practices and the extractive gaze strive to conceal.

In this article, we draw on two pairs of categories that guide the analysis of images: presence and absence; visibility and invisibility. Informed by Lefebvre (1974, 1980/1983), we understand that all representation simultaneously articulates what appears and what is withdrawn from the scene. In this sense, we analyse which signs and elements present in images evoke absences, as in the case of garments in a changing room that refer to the bodies of workers who do not appear in the photograph. In addressing representations of space, Lefebvre allows us to conceive of photography as a form of epistemological production of space, alongside maps, plans, and laws. The pair visibility-invisibility, in turn, refers to regimes of recognition that determine which subjects may appear as legitimate parts of memory and history. Thus, we understand images as mechanisms of power that participate in the production of marginality, subalternisation, and dehumanisation.

From this constellation of elements that compels us to look at the reverse side of the photograph and its deeper substrate, Allan Sekula (1983, 2002) and Siobhan Angus (2024) provide the theoretical foundation that situates debates on visual culture, extractivism, and archival politics at the core of this investigation. In dialogue with this field, Judith Butler (2009/2015) contributes to understanding how visual framings organise regimes of recognisability and determine which lives become apprehensible within the field of appearance. Ariella Azoulay (2019/2024) allows us to think of photography beyond documentary record, as a political and imperial dispositif traversed by disputes over memory and historical responsibility. Walter Benjamin (1982/2021) underpins a reading of the image as an open historical constellation, traversed by traces, phantasmagorias, and interrupted temporalities, while Jacques Rancière contributes to an understanding of the dispute over forms of visibility and the distribution of the sensible (Gomes, 2014). Thus, we understand the image as a field of political, historical, and epistemological dispute.

SPHERES OF APPEARANCE AND THE POLITICS OF FRAMING

An image can open a critical space that reveals not only the time in which it was conceived, but also shifting temporal spirals that reaffirm the incompleteness of history. We advocate the exercise of prolonging the state of suspension in which we are led to dwell in the encounter with the image and, as an insurgent gesture, of taking it as a critical proposition whose form of realisation remains as yet unknown. If “history decomposes into images, not into stories” (Benjamin, 1982/2021, p. 518), we seek to create a space of presentation in which an image, together with its sphere of circulation, becomes related to the “destructive” movement of history. Such a movement is capable of wrenching arrangements from their contexts to offer us a different constellation.

This destructive effect is a condition for the proposition of history against the grain (Benjamin, 2001/2005), breaking with the linear temporality that suggests a false continuity and produces the assumption of historical integrity. Thus, the installation of

a new temporality, in which the past encounters the present, emerges as a possibility of critical actualisation (Benjamin, 1982/2021). In this sense, Benjaminian theory allows us to read an image in its instability and openness, and therefore in its potential for historical cognisability.

Thinking through images also entails recognising that every photograph performs an act of selection, organising what we can receive and perceive. Each framing determines not only what appears, but also what is withdrawn from the scene, thereby instituting a field of visibility that shapes our reading of the social world.

If photography is not a neutral form of documentation but a complex artefact that can operate as an imperial technology for fixing the real and enacting colonial violence (Azoulay, 2019/2024), the appearance of a seemingly simple record carries and produces framings that narrate the scene and configure our gaze (Butler, 2009/2015). In this sense, framing is not limited to the camera's position or the image's cropping; rather, through the way it communicates reality, it can modulate it and inform a regime of world-making. This world, however, despite often presenting itself as true and unitary, presupposes the frames that delimit and organise it and, therefore, can never attain full integrity.

The delimitation of the sphere of appearance through visual framing is the starting point for our understanding of epistemological framings — conceptual frames that prevent us from apprehending life in its crises and contradictions. Visual production, together with the discourse that guides it, helps to produce norms and understandings of humanity and, in this sense, framing can operate at an ontological level, insofar as it participates in the constitution of the very forms through which certain lives become apprehensible and recognisable (Butler, 2009/2015). According to Judith Butler (2009/2015), “the ‘frames’ that work to differentiate the lives we can apprehend from those we cannot (...) not only organise visual experience but also generate specific ontologies of the subject” (p. 17).

In analysing image production and the frames that not only constitute images but also constitute us as subjects, the philosopher argues that frames are operations of power. This is because they delimit spheres of appearance and, consequently, organise our sensible experience and our apprehension of what counts as a life. This organisation is enacted not only through what is shown, but above all through the manner in which reality is presented to us.

When observing the changing room (Figure 1), recorded at different times and in different contexts, we find a space devoid of people but filled with objects. Suspended uniforms, boots, and helmets materialise residual presences, producing a scene marked by the unresolved tension between what remains (material traces) and what has been removed through the photographic gesture (the historical subject). The suspension of these objects also suggests the suspension of those lives themselves, held within an interrupted temporality, as though they remained waiting to be once again called into the field of memory and appearance. There is a discrepancy that expresses a regime of appearance which organises the visible to determine which lives may be recognised (Butler, 2009/2015) and which are systematically excluded not only from representation but also from a repaired world (Azoulay, 2019/2024).



Figure 1. “Antigo Vestiário” (Former Changing Room), displayed at the AngloGold Ashanti Memory Centre (2024)

Credits. Unknown author

The regime of display (Figure 2) of the analysed image is linked to a private cultural centre established in the former manor house of the colonial estate of the mining complex, whose aim is to produce a memory of the Morro Velho mine and of the mining company itself. To this end, an extensive collection of objects (telephones, clocks, coins, porcelain, weapons, etc.) structures the entire exhibition itinerary, securing for the company a narrative of technical, urban, and social protagonism in relation to the region of Nova Lima and the regional economy. We therefore understand this Memory Centre as an institutional dispositif that ratifies and legitimises colonial and capitalist framings of power.



Figure 2. Photograph displayed at the AngloGold Ashanti Memory Centre

Credits. Marina Gil de Pádua, Carolina Maria Soares Lima and Ísis Detomi

The colonial script produces partial blind spots (Taylor, 2013), and the image in question, in relation to its context of production and display, constitutes a symptom of this intelligibility. The formulation of the caption (“former changing room — industrial area, Nova Lima/MG [Minas Gerais]”) reinforces this erasure by restricting the reading of the image to the functional dimension of the industrial space. The viewer, informed only of an aspect of spatial organisation that structures labour dynamics, is led to perceive the scene as devoid of the social and historical experiences that traversed it. The photograph, in this context, operates as a purely informative device, aligned with a neutrality and simplicity that forecloses other interpretative or critical openings.

If images organise and give form to the world as we know it, it is crucial to recognise that the production of humanity is also revealed through visual production. By restricting the representability of the human (Butler, 2009/2015), the framing we engage with establishes that the life of the mining worker is ontologically intelligible only as an abstract function, devoid of history. In this sense, the photograph appears to transform the space presented to us into a zone of detention (Rizek, 2012), a site of indeterminacy in which the non-visible is held in place and cannot escape the intended frame.

What is at stake, therefore, are the very conditions of appearance and recognition of the lives that sustained mining labour. The photograph’s framing empties the scene of subjects. It reduces labour to the functionality of industrial space, producing a politics of absence that naturalises the erasure of these experiences and limits what can be perceived as life, memory, and history within the institutional narrative.

QUESTIONS FOR PHOTOGRAPHS

When we turn our gaze towards the two photographs, questions emerge that traverse different dimensions of life, labour, and the image's space. The first concerns the bodies that once wore these clothes. Erased from visibility, these bodies experienced the changing room as a transitional space between life within and beyond productive labour, prompting us to ask what this in-between space can reveal about the social world. Through this threshold, we may question the production of space, the invisible labour that structures it, as well as the photograph's absences and presences. Thus, through a conversation with images, we seek to disobey the imposed frame and advance the historical intelligibility of the lives erased by the mining narrative. Let us begin with the bodies.

WHERE ARE THE BODIES THAT WEAR THESE CLOTHES?

In its current location, this photograph constitutes one of the rare traces in which labour appears to admit a body. Yet, as an embodiment deprived of recognisable life, the imposed regime of visibility indicates that, in the end, these are not lives but merely garments. The absence of any direct reference to the workers who were part of the history of the Morro Velho mine, combined with the articulation between the caption and the exhibition context, organises a visual experience that prevents the apprehension of these subjects and, consequently, precludes acts of recognition. This framing does not present lives in their fragility or potentiality; on the contrary, they have been erased from the scene. This prevents the observer from responding to either working conditions or the complexities of workers' lives, as the representational operations themselves hinder such critical engagement.

The photograph of the changing room, saturated with objects and emptied of bodies, reveals a politics of absence constitutive of the capitalist production of space. Henri Lefebvre (1980/1983) demonstrates that all representation operates through the simultaneous articulation of presence and absence; that is, whatever appears is always marked by what is missing. In the context of cities, official plans and images frequently erase workers and the urban poor, whose presence is fundamental both to the materiality of the city (for example, through construction workers) and to its social reproduction (for example, through domestic workers, who ensure that their employers have time to perform other functions). These bodies, even when erased from images and official documents, have been present in cities since the beginning of those cities' histories. This absence is deliberate and forms part of a logic of domination that operates through representation: capitalist space consecrates the vision of planners and capitalists while silencing the contributions of the subalternised classes that effectively build and care for cities.

In the photograph under analysis, therefore, the bodies disappear. Every item of clothing is worn by someone, and these garments, in particular, were intended for work, standardising a series of subjects who evidently possessed identities that exceeded their relationship to labour. The subjects who inhabited the space they produced and who were essential to the operation of the mine do not even appear in the images. Among

what is displayed, there is no record of these subjects in their complexity and forms of sociability beyond the notion of a homogeneous whole geared towards the functioning of the mine². Representing them through a collection of uniforms, therefore, operates as a Benjaminian phantasmagoria of products detached from human labour. Walter Benjamin (1982/2021) analysed how commodities appear detached from the human labour that produced them, sustaining an imaginary in which products and services seem to exist without labour. The absence of workers from the images sustains an imaginary of products and services without labour — in other words, a distancing from the very nature of our interactions with the world.

Judith Butler (2009/2015), deepening the critique of representation, argues that visual and epistemic framings determine which lives are recognised as worthy of being lived and grieved, and which disappear socially even before they are taken and vanish materially. If we apply Lefebvre's (1980/1983) notions of presence and absence to the image under analysis, we can see that the suspended uniforms evoke a residual presence — a materiality that persists, but whose life has been removed from the visible field.

The work appears disembodied, as though conducted solely by the company, disregarding the bodies that extracted wealth from the earth and sustained parts of the regional and national economy across generations. The photograph records the residues of life while suppressing the living subject itself, highlighting that there are lives which the social structure deems irrelevant, to the point of being systematically neglected, to remain within spaces of memory. Thus, these photographs are not merely a document of a space, but a visual and ontological operation that compels us to question the systematic erasure of the bodies that sustain labour history.

HOW CAN WE KNOW THE SOCIAL WORLD IN THIS TRANSITIONAL SPACE?

The production of space is a fundamental condition for the reproduction of capital (Lefebvre, 1974). In this sense, it is necessary to note that capitalism reproduces itself through the production of urban space, practices, and relations — both productive and social — and expropriates the workers who underpin this process. These workers are also frequently erased from representations of space, whether in photographs, maps, or other representations that conform to hegemonic regimes of visibility — even though representations, imaginaries, and histories produced by these groups have always existed (Lima & Freitas, 2024; Musa, 2022).

² While this article was being written, an exhibition titled *Fundamento: Africanos e Afro-Brasileiros em Morro Velho in Morro Velho* (Fundament: Africans and Afro-Brazilians in Morro Velho) was inaugurated at the same Memory Centre, with the aim of highlighting the presence of Black people in Morro Velho's history during the 19th and 20th centuries. Through this exhibition, visitors are presented with faces, full names, catalogue records, and even artistic expressions and ways of life beyond labour. For the first time in more than 30 years of the memorial space's existence, these bodies have, in a certain sense, been endowed with visibility. Despite representing an important advance in terms of the politics of representation, we contend that visibility, when associated with corporate interests and dissociated from a politics of reparation committed to class struggle, does not contribute to a dismantling of history (Benjamin, 2001/2005) or to the unlearning of imperialism (Azoulay, 2019/2024).

The changing room appears as a threshold of everyday life, a transitional space between life and work, and within it, the social world of mining is made visible only through its residues. John Berger (2008) argues that images can mystify social relations by concealing the labour that sustains the production of what is represented, and thus the changing room is reduced to an industrial imaginary of objects. Ariella Azoulay (2019/2024) proposes the notion of a “potential history”, inviting us to reimagine everything from the timeline that organises sovereign politics to the interpretation of individual photographs. Building on Berger (2008), the photographed changing room thus functions as a kind of veil, displaying the aesthetic ordering of chains, uniforms, and benches while omitting the social world that is condensed within it. Azoulay (2019/2024) invites us to shift our gaze and, in accepting this invitation, we find it essential to ask what has been excluded from the frame and to break the silence imposed by the photographic regime and the archive. The social dimension is present through minimal traces that emerge when we imagine the subjects who wore these clothes and changed in this space. To know the social world through this image — this changing room — therefore requires a reading beyond — or even against — the frame, reconstituting what has been buried by photography and curation.

The photograph makes visible the division between manual and intellectual labour that structures the capitalist production of space, visually translating a historical hierarchy that separates those who plan from those who execute. Alfred Sohn-Rethel (2020) demonstrates how modernity consolidates the dissociation between conceptual and executive labour, attributing different values to each. David Graeber (2018), in turn, shows how essential forms of labour, such as mining work, are systematically invisibilised and devalued, concealed within the very landscape they produce, while bureaucratic functions acquire symbolic centrality. The changing room enacts this division precisely, since while its photographic representation is carefully framed by intellectual labour (curatorial, photographic, museological), the lives of miners remain inscribed only through their uniforms. Graeber helps us understand this erasure by offering a key interpretative lens: bodies that produce the city’s material wealth are considered replaceable. Ultimately, any body could wear these clothes. In some cases, the uniforms do not even belong to the workers themselves. Meanwhile, other bodies, linked to administrative or technocratic spheres, acquire greater social value. The production of space (Lefebvre, 1974) depends on these replaceable bodies, yet their representation erases them, reaffirming their historical position of subalternisation. Thus, the photograph materialises the social order that produced it, making invisible labour a profound and pronounced feature of urban-industrial spatial production.

Given that the photograph registers a specific mode of representing manual labour under capitalism — that is, as an abstract function devoid of face, history, and vulnerability — this erasure reiterates the same logic that structures the mining economy, namely a system that depends on bodies but keeps them outside a regime of appearance as subjects. From this, we may also associate the very constitution of photography, in which

contemporary discourses attempt to frame it as an immaterial, purely virtual technology, without organic mediation. As Angus (2024) argues, photography must be understood as both image and object, articulating representation and materiality, and depending on synthetic inputs as well as elements from the animal, vegetal, and mineral realms. The apparent dematerialisation of photography is therefore linked to the attempted dematerialisation of labour itself, since both are subjected to processes of abstraction.

This ideological enchantment with the dematerialisation of the world is actively supported by transnational corporations, which strive to erase the traces of both natural extraction and human labour. In the images, the chains suspended from the ceiling, used to raise and lower uniforms, become a symbol of this economy. They sustain the garments, but also sustain erasure, concealing the explicit and everyday violences inscribed upon the bodies, times, gestures, and discourses that traverse workers' lives.

While Butler (2009/2015) shows that the logic of the frame organises who is worthy of appearance and how, Silvia Federici (2012/2019) demonstrates how essential forms of reproductive labour remain hidden and naturalised within production dynamics, such that the economy itself determines who can be recognised as a worker. Mining, as visible productive labour, is only possible because another form of labour (invisible, everyday, reproductive) sustains these workers' lives: cooking, washing, caring, ensuring that those bodies have the minimum conditions to endure the underground. The miners' clothes and objects are therefore elements of the reproduction of life that were likely washed, mended, and cared for by women, within a reproductive circuit that also disappears from the photograph and from the objects themselves.

These women, fundamental to the reproduction of labour power, do not appear in the changing room, are not included in the caption, and do not form part of the archive. The image, therefore, performs a double erasure, first, of the productive body descending into the mine (male/formal) and, second, of the reproductive body that sustained that life (female/informal)³. Rancière illuminates the political mechanism of this disappearance by arguing that regimes of visibility determine what can be perceived and what remains hidden within the distribution of the sensible (Gomes, 2014). In this case, clothes without bodies materialise the absence of both male worker and female worker, and both figures are rendered invisible through distinct — but complementary — regimes that ensure the continuity of production while naturalising the system's dependence on unrecognised lives.

Finally, the public visibility of these bodies appears to be conditioned by disaster⁴, when they are momentarily recognised as a collective mass of fatalities. However, this form of appearance seems to be integrated into the very logic of disaster, and is therefore unable to trigger the brake on the march of the history of exploitation.

As presented to us, the photograph in Figure 1 does not invite us to look for conflict, contradictions, or the risks that traversed these lives. Yet, although the museological

³ Women are part of the history of mining not only through the reproductive and invisible labour they perform for their partners, children, fathers, and grandchildren, but also within the productive circuit. However, even when directly involved in this process, they are not usually recognised as miners or important participants in mining. In the case of the Morro Velho mine, they were known as “*escolhedeiras*” (ore sorters), working in the ore selection and crushing area (Castilhos & Castro, 2006).

⁴ For discussions on the production of disasters in the context of the Morro Velho mine, see Rocha and Baltazar (2024).

narrative seeks to obscure colonial and capitalist violence, we argue that it continues to insist on becoming present.

IN THE FACE OF ABSENCE, WHAT ENABLES US TO VISUALISE LIFE?

The history presented throughout the museum itinerary, seemingly purely documentary at first glance, becomes eminently political when interrogated through Butler's (2009/2015) theoretical framework: what does the frame allow us to see, and what must it remove from the scene for the narrative to make sense? Which lives have been excluded from this sphere of appearance, and under what regime of power did this exclusion occur?

Paradoxically, it is precisely the absence of these bodies that makes it possible to imagine them, transforming the photograph into a space of fabulation. Walter Benjamin (1982/2021), in his analysis of the phantasmagoria of commodities, describes how objects can simultaneously bear the violence of capital and promise redemption. Working with archives of unrecognisable lives, Saidiya Hartman (2021) proposes critical fabulation as a means of restoring humanity to that which history has erased.

From this perspective, we understand the suspended uniforms as phantasmagorias, for they are objects torn from the body that now hover between presence and absence, between what was and what might have been. Hartman guides us not to fill absence with fiction, but to create a space in which we recognise that there were once full lives here, with desires, fears, joys, and histories that the archive does not record — and that it would possibly not record even if the bodies themselves were present. The hesitation between the visible and the omitted creates an opening for a political imagination in which the past may be reoccupied by those expelled from the archive. In this way, visualising life through absence constitutes a gesture that challenges the apparent neutrality of the photographic record and calls forth new forms of memory.

There is something that exceeds the frame proposed by the first image. The suspended objects persist in offering traces of lives that could never fit within the official narrative and seem to function as remnants that disturb the scene's cleanliness and call for a critical labour of looking. If, according to Butler (2009/2015), a life becomes grievable only when it is recognised as such — that is, as valid or significant — and if, according to Federici (2012/2019), capitalism depends precisely on the non-recognition or invisibility of certain lives, namely those engaged in the reproduction of life through care work, domestic labour, or reproductive labour, then the regime of visibility established by this photograph confronts us with the epistemological urgency of recovering what it seeks to remove from perception: the lives that laboured, the lives that cared, and the lives that were necessary for mining itself to exist.

In this sense, the objects suspended in the changing room constitute a possibility for apprehending absent lives, for they reveal something that continues to return as a material ghost. Might they possess agency (Gell, 2001), thereby indicating other possible ways of reading the image? As overalls, helmets, boots, and gloves participate in and occupy the visual scene, they not only compose the world in which they are inscribed

but also redraw it. By establishing a tension within the image space, they activate other capacities for seeing and reinstate modes of apprehension that, according to Butler (2009/2015), may be subjected to critical exercise within the sphere of recognition.

Thus, the suspended objects acquire and point towards the lives that interacted — and continue to interact — with them and, in this sense, the inscriptions of the other offer us a negative experience, that is, one constituted through absence or through its opposite. It is in this way that we seek an experience of contemplation also in the negative, enabled by what Rita Velloso (2022) describes as the gesture of “un-seeing”: “it is an argument opposed to the obedient acceptance of the daily flow of images imprinted upon the retina, without even imagining the possibility of closing one’s eyes against them and resisting the passivisation of life that results from them” (p. 196).

By reading these traces as a materiality that testifies to absence, we seek to open space for a broader critique of the politics of visibility that structure the city, labour, and their memories. The analysis of the photograph, its circulation, and its museological framing enables us to challenge debates on visual culture, archives, and extractivism by demonstrating that images actively participate in the production of narratives that organise what can be seen, remembered, and recognised as part of history. In this sense, the analysis demonstrates how visual and institutional dispositifs naturalise the erasure of the lives that sustained mining extraction. At the same time, the very material traces present in the image insist on destabilising this politics of absence and reopening the possibility of alternative critical readings of the archive and memory. Thus, the objects present may stand in contrast to the linear narrative, and the wager is that, through them, we may come to perceive the life that exceeds the memory centre’s representational project. From disposable lives, we may recover, within this space of hesitation, the phantasmagoria that persists and calls us towards a critical potential for disrupting the historical continuity of progress. They therefore demand a disobedience of vision and make it possible, through a critique within the space of the image, to formulate a critique of labour and of prevailing understandings of humanity.

EXCAVATING IMAGES, REINSCRIBING ABSENCES

The images of the changing room at the Morro Velho mine show that the memory of mining labour is shaped by both what appears and what the scene withdraws from view. The emptying of bodies, the insistence of objects, and the frame that organises them operate not merely as aesthetic choices, but as operations that define which lives can be recognised and which remain outside the field of appearance. Throughout this article, we have shown how these photographs participate in the production of space and in the administration of the sensible, articulating regimes of visibility that naturalise the absence of workers and, at the same time, silence the social relations that sustained mining. By analysing the photograph alongside its circuits of circulation and exhibition, the article highlights how visual archives and museological dispositifs contribute to the production of narratives about labour, memory, and extractivism.

The difficulty of our own bodies in recognising the violence inscribed in an image that appears pacified points to the need to critically reinscribe the absences it produces. Such reactivation, however, does not entail repeating the narrative of disaster, but rather activating other historical spirals and pursuing trajectories that diverge from those produced by the aesthetic, epistemic, and political dimensions of imperial logic (Azoulay, 2019/2024). Thinking through images, in this sense, does not constitute a supplementary exercise to historical writing, but a way of revisiting the social world through the vestiges that insist on persisting. Even though the photographed scene suppresses the workers' figure, it leaves traces that disturb the official narrative and call for a critical exercise capable of exceeding the appearance of documentary neutrality.

In this movement, absences do not appear as simple gaps, but as that which keeps the image open. Suspended objects operate as residual presences that escape the frame and activate questions about invisibilised labour, lives excluded from the caption, and the archival politics that organise what can be remembered. By shifting the photograph from a pacified record to a field of dispute, visual critique reinscribes absence as a historical problem. It brings back to the centre what the image sought to neutralise: living labour, everyday reproduction, and the material conditions that sustain the city, even when they are not recorded.

Reinscribing absences, in this sense, is not about restoring a lost past, but about recognising that the vestiges present in an image carry potentials that challenge official narratives. Excavating these images means displacing the gaze, interrogating the frame, and restoring historical density to the lives excluded from the field of visibility. The analysed photographs do not merely document the world of labour; they also reveal how it has been continually removed from view and disavowed in its exploitation. Through their critical reinscription, it becomes possible to recover what was omitted and reimagine how the history of mining is told.

Although grounded in the specific context of gold mining at the Morro Velho mine in Minas Gerais, Brazil, the discussion developed in this article points to broader dynamics of the contemporary city. The politics of absence identified in the changing room reappears in different urban registers, where the labour that constructs, maintains, and reproduces space is systematically rendered invisible. Images of construction sites, heritage sites, infrastructures, and urban landscapes frequently celebrate finished forms, progress, or technical achievement, while silencing bricklayers, workers, cleaners, transport workers, and those involved in care and everyday maintenance. Thinking through images thus emerges as a critical method that extends beyond mining and enables an interrogation of the regimes of visibility that organise the city, revealing continuities between exploitation, erasure, and the production of space across different scales and contexts. The analysis thus understands images and archives not as passive records of mining, but as visual and institutional operations that organise regimes of recognition, historicity, and visibility.

In this way, we understand that the critical exercise of thinking through images does not function as a supplement, but as a condition for reopening history. It allows

photographed objects to become agents of memory, absences to cease being gaps to be filled, and instead operate as starting points, and vestiges to cease being silent residues and become critical possibilities. By excavating these images, we affirm that the struggle over the visible is also a struggle over historical responsibility: disputing captions, archives, and curatorial frameworks is to dispute who has the right to appear as a subject in public memory and which lives count as part of history. By tensioning the relationship between photography, archive, and museological display, this article seeks to contribute to debates on visual culture and extractivism, showing how memory dispositifs participate in the naturalisation of violence and the erasure of the lives that sustain mining extraction. Reinscription, therefore, does not “resolve” erasure, but renders it legible, contestable, and politically actionable, opening space for other narratives, other testimonies, and, above all, for the construction of forms of historical redress. Even when suspended, these presences continue to claim the right to appear and indicate the urgency of unsettling the aesthetic, epistemic, and ontological frameworks that organise the capitalist and imperial urban world.

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