

AT FACE VALUE

&

BEYOND.

PHOTOGRAPHIC
CONSTRUCTIONS
OF REALITY

MONIKA
SCHWÄRZLER

From:

Monika Schwärzler

At Face Value and Beyond

Photographic Constructions of Reality

April 2016, 188 p., 29,99 €, ISBN 978-3-8376-2954-5

How to account for the peculiar attraction of certain photos? How to deal with the specific use of images in particular contexts? Monika Schwärzler presents a variety of photographic case studies exploring visual phenomena from the point of view of media analysis as well as from sociological, aesthetic, and psychoanalytic perspectives. The topics range from a new reading of Thomas Struth's street photographs to CERN photos with their charged rhetoric, from the assault of photographic close-ups to speculations on an anonymous slide collection featuring a woman with an ever-present white handbag. The book is intended for an audience receptive to the analytical appeal of images, prepared to go beyond what can be taken at face value.

Associate Professor Dr. **Monika Schwärzler** teaches in the Department of Media Communications at Webster Vienna Private University.

For further information:

www.transcript-verlag.de/978-3-8376-2954-5

11

Introductory Remarks

17

Conscious and Semi-Conscious States of the Camera
Comments on a History of Photographic Parapraxes

33

Dressed to Suffer and Redeem
Staged Photography Featuring Biblical Narratives

55

Blocked View and Impeded Vision
An Affective Response to the Photographs of
Maria Hahnenkamp and Thomas Struth

73

Unedited Glamor
The Vienna Opera Ball and Its Rendition by Network Cameras

95

Lost in Pleasure

Mad Joy in Images of Youth Culture

113

Death Can Wait

Images of Old Age and Dying in Austrian Hospice Campaigns

137

“The Beast”

**On the Photographic Staging of the Large Hadron Collider
at the Nuclear Research Center in Geneva**

151

Denigrative Views

On the Deconstruction of Visages in Print Media

163

The White Handbag

Photography and Ownership

Introductory Remarks

At Face Value & Beyond comprises papers that were delivered at international conferences over a course of about 10 years. Although the particular contributions were all guided by an interest in Visual Culture, the single papers were created in response to particular conference themes. Hence, the contexts in which they were delivered were highly diversified and sometimes widely apart concerning their disciplines. On these grounds, it seemed a difficult if not impossible task to legitimize the co-existence of these texts in one book. Interestingly, though, in hindsight and while revising these conference papers, it turned out that there were a few recurring themes governing this text production. This came as a surprising insight and seemed to sustain the thesis that all our intellectual activities circle around certain themes that are of particular relevance to us as writers and researchers. We are obviously prone to taking up certain challenges time and again. Even if we are not fully aware of this fascination, or able to account for it in a rational way, specific key topics seem to retain their potential to fuel our research interests over years.

In the following, I would like to delineate some of the traits that seem to govern my intellectual inquisitiveness. As the chapter *Conscious and Semi-Conscious States of the Camera. Comments on a History of Photographic Parapraxes* indicates, I am deeply fascinated with photographic lapses, failures, and unintended results of the photographic process. The investigation deals with a kind of early snapshot photography practiced by the Scottish photographer James Craig Annan. At a time when his fellow photographers worked in a Pictorialist manner trying to tame the unruly new medium and subject it to the principles of classical picture making, Craig Annan loosened this tight regime of well calculated photographic output. Instead of measuring the photographic image by perfectly composed paintings, he, at a certain point in his career, freed himself from these constraints and embarked on the recording of fugitive moments, chance constellations, and the unforeseeable. Along with this new direction came an interest in photographic imperfection, non-justifiable details, and technical flaws that resulted from a lack of control and renunciation of classical authorship. It was this sense of risk and curiosity that prompted his investigation into the photo camera's potential for deviations from the classical pictorial codes. People like Craig Annan understood that the medium's unique sources of aberration would generate unfamiliar images of reality.

The chapter *Unedited Glamor: The Vienna Opera Ball and Its Rendition by Network Cameras* deals with a type of observation camera aesthetic that radicalizes Craig Annan's attempt to give free reign to the camera in a much further way. For his 2009 project *Vienna MMIX*, Jules Spinatsch, a Swiss artist, delegated the photographic process of recording the annual Vienna Opera Ball to observation cameras. The interactive digital network cameras installed on the premises of the Vienna opera were programmed to chronicle the entire ball from its start at 8:32 p.m. to its end at 5:10 in the morning. Consequently, the ball reality presented by Spinatsch has very little in common with the carefully staged images of this prestigious societal event. The rotating network cameras delivered a splintered, torn up, and disintegrated version of the ball, which makes it hard to form a cognitive model of the space where the event took place. Due to the logic of the set-up, the cameras recorded everything that got caught in their shifting frames, making no difference between stately columns and a crumpled tissue in a hidden corner. A close reading of Spinatsch's project will deal with the problematic aspects, but also the anarchic wit of these surveillance camera images. Above all, it will focus on the impact of this automatized recording on the depiction of the ball goers whose unfavorable rendering seems to result from a lack of proper framing and careful staging of their personae.

Jules Spinatsch's Vienna Opera Ball project has strong media analytical traits. The same holds true for Thomas Struth's and Maria Hahnenkamp's works, which are the subjects of analysis in the chapter on *Blocked View and Impeded Vision*. In his early street photography, Struth is much more than a chronicler of urban space scenarios, but rather designs a setting that allows for a meticulous investigation of the nature of the photographic medium. All these photographs from the 1970s and 80s follow a strong perspectival order and play with its inherent promise of a potentially unlimited extension of space. At the same time, the photos are taken in such a way that they block the view and put a clear limit on the invasive gaze. The viewer's gaze slams into walls, runs up against major obstacles like building blocks, or finds itself in a dead-end situation. In this way, Struth traps the protruding gaze, brings its expansion to a halt and, by doing so, offers the possibility to reflect upon the conditions of photographic production and perception.

Maria Hahnenkamp has a strong feminist agenda and her highly conceptual artistic approach concerns the gendered nature of the gaze. The fragmented female bodies of her "two women" series seem to form an insurmountable barrier in the foreground of the photos and draw the attention to a long tradition of sexualized use of the pictorial space. Her adamant red guards deny entry, reject intrusion, ward off the gaze and, most notably, confront the viewers with their scopophilic desires that thrive on the idea that even hidden and forbidden things will be revealed to them.

Another recurring fascination that can be identified concerns the use of close-ups of faces in particular forms of visual communication. The chapter *Death Can Wait* deals with the PR campaigns of two Austrian institutions, namely a hospice and a nursing home. The analysis covers a period of about 10 years (2002 – 2012), during which both of these institutions tried to promote their cause in the public and create awareness about new forms of aging and dying in post-industrial societies. The campaign posters displayed on billboards, rolling boards, or in the print media were powerful and disconcerting and made heavy use of close-ups of aged faces. These photos of wrinkled faces, sagging skin and age spots seemed to zoom in on an underrepresented or shunned bodily and social reality. My point will be that in the light of Emmanuel Levinas' ethics, the visual strategies of these campaigns take on a particular meaning and prove to be especially powerful. The frontal views of aged faces with particular attention to their eyes simulate what Levinas defined as the original encounter with the other and seem to be much more efficient than the common photos of old people being taken care of by nursing personnel. Attention will also be given to those campaigns that emphasized the compatibility of old age and fun, as well as to others trying to picture the heart-rending irreversibility of a lifetime.

Print and online magazines often work with close-ups of prominent faces. By repeatedly promoting and circulating particular versions of prominent faces, they enhance the process of the iconization of these images. One could say that a considerable amount of input is needed to firmly root certain facial features in the public's mind and to make them easily identifiable. Paradoxically, the energy invested in building up and establishing recognizable traits can morph into its opposite and result in a deconstruction of these familiar images. The chapter *Denigrative Views. On the Deconstruction of Visages in Print Media* offers an explanation of these negative dynamics by referring to Georges Bataille's understanding of energetic processes. In its unbound state, this potential can turn into waste, loss, and destruction. The investigation itself focuses on two cover pictures of the Austrian news magazine "profil" from 2006/2007. The highly unfavorable close-up of George W. Bush's face denies any claim to authority and adds a visual dimension to an overall critical article about him. With such denigrative views of well-known people, the forces at play are ruthless and disproportional in their will to dismantle prominence. According to the cultural philosopher Thomas Macho (1999), enlarged faces that are presented as dissected from the rest of the body are automatically prone to assault and deconstruction. On these occasions, media practices seem to turn against their own products. A corresponding cover page of the *Herald Tribune* presenting an image of "dirty" George Clooney shall demonstrate that media professionals like Clooney can occasionally turn the demontage of their glamorous persona into an interesting performance.

Three of the nine chapters of this publication are based on photo books. The contemporary photo book is a fascinating genre and much closer to artists' books than to the classical coffee table book with its compilation of glossy photographs under a particular heading. Prize-winning books like Jules Spinatsch's volumes on the Vienna Opera Ball are highly ambitious in terms of their layout, and push the limits of innovative book design. For the last 15 to 20 years, these kinds of publications have become collectibles whose value sometimes increases considerably over relatively short periods of time (Schaden, 2010). Photo books featuring the works of already famous or emerging photographers allow small pocket buyers to own works of their favorite photographers without having to pay the much higher prices for prints on the art market. The chapter *Lost in Pleasure. Mad Joy in Images of Youth Culture* draws its material of investigation from *Be Happy!*, a photo book by a young Russian photographer, and Paul Kwiatkowski's *And Every Day Was Overcast*, an illustrated novel about his youth in California. Both books feature disconcerting and bewildering images of youth experimenting with alternative life styles. It goes without saying that forms of excess and inflections of taboos call for a type of aesthetic that also deviates from the norm. Norbert Pfaller's (2000) psychoanalytical approach to cultural phenomena and, in particular, his concept of "interpassivity" shall provide a key for the analysis of the provocation of the off-limits joys of the young protagonists.

LHC, the photo book on the construction and set-up of the Large Hadron Collider at CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research, is a massive, elaborate, and representative publication that bears the closest resemblance to a classical photo book. The photographs by Peter Ginter, which are the output of a documentation that went on for 10 years, give a thorough and multifaceted impression of the world's largest particle accelerator. Fitting its scientific subject, the book provides a comprehensive and systematic coverage of it topic. Unlike the photo books by Kwiatkowski and Samolet, which follow a rather casual aesthetic, the *LHC* images were all subjected to a careful post-production process and attest to the latest standards in this field. The text *The Beast* will concentrate on the effect of these digital improvements on the representation of the activities at CERN. My point will be that these light-enhanced photographs featuring glowing and shiny technology generate an almost eschatological dimension in which the processes at CERN are perceived. Due to their digital upgrading, scientists mutate into spiritual leaders who pursue their activities in environments bathed in light. The rhetoric promoting this enlightened world of scientific ambition and heroic struggle is hymnal in tone, and the technology discourse featured in *LHC* heavily dependent on overpowering images.

Visual narratives and their construction of realities are definitely one of the threads running through this loose combination of texts. The CERN visuals tell a success story of scientific and technological advancement. It is a story of great ambition,

dedication, and impressive results conveyed in a rhetoric that allows for no doubts, questions, or backtalk. On the other hand, Samolet's and Kwiatkowski's stories do not seek viewer approval, and hope to retain their repulsive tone. The chapter *Dressed to Suffer and Redeem* deals with another grand narrative, namely the biblical story of Jesus and its appropriation in contemporary art photography. There is a long tradition of reviving these religious themes in painting, but the corresponding investigation in this volume wants to take a closer look at interesting photographic attempts to re-enact or stage these key narratives of Christian culture. Whereas 19th century photographers like F. Holland Day tried to be as iconographically "true" as possible and stage the sacred events along the lines of famous forerunners in art history, contemporary artists like Serge Bramly & Bettina Rheims, or Adi Nes, tried to actualize and update the core themes of the Bible. Their adaptation of religious narratives transposes them into today's world and tells them in a contemporary idiom. This act of translation can be a risk-taking endeavor that, for many people, borders on blasphemy. My close reading of their images shall prove that by disclosing the kernels of these stories and giving them a new form, Bramly & Rheims are able to address leading social issues of the present. By using the framework of the old stories and drawing on their unbowed powers, they manage to put today's notions of, for instance, motherhood, sexuality, suffering, guilt, shame, and fear into a perspective that ties in with our cultural heritage.

But what kind of story should one construct from an anonymous slide collection discovered at a flea market? How to generate a narrative the main parameters of which are missing and have fallen into oblivion? Still, it can be an interesting and worthwhile endeavor to base a story on careful observations and assumptions, relying on the fact that all our records of personal history are culturally mediated and strongly informed by comparable stories. When dealing with these found images, the main challenge was to consider the standardized versions of such documents and at the same time be highly attentive to the individual nuances of these visuals. The chapter *The White Handbag. Photography and Ownership* tries to come to conclusions about the lives of Ms. Elfriede and Mr. Alfred, as they are called in the captions of their slides. They left a slide collection of about 2000 photos to posterity, probably assuming that their effort would matter. Most of the photos are from the 1970s and 80s. They documented their occasional journeys, proudly presented their belongings, and provided insight into their habits and their modest social life. It may well be that the Ms. Elfriede, sitting in their small garden and enjoying the sun, anticipated future viewers who would testify to the significance of the photographic remains of their days.

Postscript

Two of the papers were originally written in German, all the others were conceived in English. Being aware of my limited means of expression as a non-native speaker, I kindly ask the reader to take this into consideration and bear with me.