Madeline Ferretti-Theilig
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2021

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Madeline Ferretti-Theilig

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Abstract

Im Folgenden wird ein historischer Blick auf die sich wandelnden Auffassungen von Fotografie seit den 1950er Jahren geworfen, wobei grundlegende Prämissen identifiziert werden, die den Diskurs der Fotografie bis ins 21. Jahrhundert bestimmt und gleichzeitig Widersprüche zwischen Theorie und Praxis geschaffen haben. Am Beispiel der umstrittenen Rezeptionsgeschichte der Ausstellung *The Family of Man* von Edward Steichen werden zentrale Aspekte der Performativität der Fotografie beleuchtet, die von der konventionellen Theorie nicht beachtet wurden. Darüber hinaus werden sowohl historische als auch neu entstehende Quellen identifiziert, die ein umfassenderes Verständnis der gesellschaftlichen Bedeutung der Fotografie ermöglichen.

The following takes a historical look at the shifting conceptions of photography from the 1950s on, identifying foundational premises which have determined the discourse of photography into the 21st century while also creating contradictions between theory and practice. Using the controversial reception history of Edward Steichen's *The Family of Man* exhibition as an example, core aspects of photography's performativity are elucidated, which conventional theory has failed to accommodate. Further, historical as well as emerging resources are identified which facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of photography's social significance.

>New research and future predictions about the medium are worth tracking, if only to shake us out of our complacency about the types of photographic images we know« (HEIFERMAN 2012: 21).

1. Introduction

Photography and its ubiquitous presence in modern life is viewed with trepidation because, due to its complex relationship to our visible reality, it also exerts a powerful force in altering our perception of that very reality. From the middle of the last century in particular, a dominantly emerging theoretical approach consistently began to call into question the epistemic value of photographic images, powered among others by Roland Barthes, who considered these to be coded messages transporting ideologically charged connotations in the guise of so-called objective, reality-based images (cf. BARTHES 2006a; 2009). Susan Sontag, for instance, goes so far as to negate any epistemic quality of the photographic image beyond a mere semblance of truth or knowledge (cf. SONTAG 1977). Hence, photographic images have been criticized for their propensity toward aestheticization, objectification and superficial emotionalization. Yet because photography has become an essential aspect of professional and everyday life (cf. HEIFERMAN 2012), photo-theoretical distrust of the medium has created an iconoclastic approach to visual representation, which has left it blind to other aspects pertinent to it (cf., e.g., HARIMAN/LUCAITES 2016). The object of this paper is to take a historical look at how this specific way of thinking about photography emerged in the pivotal 1950s, and to examine how it redefined photography on fundamental levels, on the one hand with respect to its purpose and its relation to reality, and on the other with regard to the nature of photographic meaning. From this a theoretical framework emerged which, while allowing important reflections on the referential nature of the media, served to limit our perspective on the performativity and existential relevance of photographic practice.

2. What is Modern Photography? – The Pivotal 1950s

In the 1950s, the theoretical discourse on photography witnessed a paradigmatic shift away from conceptualizing photography as a medium of communication capable of contributing to our understanding of the world. A symposium organized by Edward Steichen at MoMA, New York in 1950 titled »What is Modern Photography?«, in which renowned individuals from diverse fields of photographic practice were invited to present statements on their understanding of photography, gives an exemplary insight into the kind of theoretical consensus which would soon be overridden by a new paradigm. No matter the practical approach, the common denominator in all statements is the understanding that photography maintains an intimate connection to our visible reality (cf. also CARTIER-BRESSON 1952, which essentially resonates with the approach

discussed in this section). Aaron Siskind (1950), for example, who created abstract-expressionist photographs as autonomous works of art, was convinced that, »the object has entered the picture. It has been photographed directly, forced into new relationships« by the photographer. Charles Sheeler (1950), in another statement, describes photography as an »abstraction with a credit line to nature«. Most explicit in this regard is Weegee (1950), who states: »To me, a photograph is a page from life, and that being the case, it must be real«

Others emphasize photography as an exceptional medium of communication, such as Irving Penn (1950), who considers it a »privilege [...] to make the most vital visual record of man's existence« through photography. Lisette Model (1950) was particularly eloquent in her conviction of photography's ability to provide meaning:

> The photograph proves to me, I am the one who learns. Ugly people are not ugly, they are vital personalities, marked by life sharply. Photographs explore new aspects of a constantly changing world. Finding these images is daring to see, to be aware of what there is and how it is...A photographer finds and gives information about life.

Edward Weston (1950) moreover, underlines the reflexive, even personal dimension of photographic practice which goes beyond the images' superficial representation of reality, arguing that is not about »seeing literally, but with intention, with reason. The camera controlled by wisdom goes way beyond statistics. [...] I don't copy nature but arouse connotations, conveying abstract ideas. I send out the best of my life focused onto a few sheets of paper«. Margaret Bourke-White, in her statement, furthermore recognizes an important ethical dimension of photographic journalism: »With the world in the confused state that it's in now, anyone who is in the position to throw light on even a small corner is in a position of great importance and responsibility«. According to Bourke-White, illuminating even a small corner of the world involves a process of research and soul-searching placed in the service of truth, whereby truth is not to be found in an individual image but evolves as a mosaic of images, which, picture for picture, allows an understanding of our visible reality to grow and sharpen our perception while honing our skills to show more through photographic images. »Photography,« she argues, »is as big as life itself« (BOURKE-WHITE 1950).

All of these statements agree on photography's resonance with life and its concomitant appearances, hence they concede photography's ability to illuminate meaningful dimensions of our visible reality. Some statements emphasize the importance of this quality, particularly in the face of modernity's prevalent sense of disorientation. Homer Page, documentary photographer and another participant of the symposium, makes a specific reference to this by mentioning a general trend toward abandoning objective reporting in favor of more subjective approaches, where photographers »ask questions rather than answer them« and which reflects »the turmoil and confusion we all feel to some extent in this world today« (PAGE 1951).

In an article published in *Aperture* magazine just two years later, the renowned photo journalist Dorothea Lange and her son, Robert Dixon,

explicitly place the trend toward more subjective and constructed images in the context of distrust toward the familiar, where »photography appears to be in flight – in flight as much from itself as from anything else« (LANGE/DIXON 1952: 9). They argue that, in an undoubtedly unsatisfactory world, photography is choosing to escape from it by focusing on »the spectacular [...] above the meaningful, the frenzied above the quiet, the unique above the potent«, abandoning the task of interpreting the world in favor of constructing realities (LANGE/DIXON 1952: 9). By rejecting the familiar, photographers cease to prove that they have the »passion and the humanity« to drive the machine and negotiate the present towards a better future (LANGE/DIXON 1952: 7). Lange and Dixon emphasize that photography is an existential practice that goes beyond mere superficialities:

> we in our work can speak more than of our subjects – we can speak with them, we can more than speak about our subjects – we can speak for them. They, given tongue, will be able to speak with and for us. And in this language will be proposed to the lens that with which, in the end, photography must be concerned – time, and place, and the works of man. (LANGE/DIXON 1952: 15)

Their approach to photography is responsively dialogical: »It is the nature of the camera to deal with what is. [...] We suggest that, as photographers, we turn our attention to the familiarities of which we are a part« (LANGE/DIXON 1952: 15). Similar to the statements above, Dorothea Lange sees photography as a means of seeking answers and contributing to an understanding of the world we live in. Her approach is marked by empathetic responsivity to, hence also personal responsibility toward, what is understood as a familiar world. In this context the photographer does not construct a subject with her lens, but rather allows a personally witnessed aspect of the world to become disclosed so that it may ›speak with us‹. From this emerges an understanding of photography as a relational practice in which the photographer is neither an anonymous observer, nor is the medium self-driven and subjugating, nor do photographs simply reproduce reality, but in which taking pictures involves a process where the photographer *responds* to whatever is in front of the lens, giving witness to an aspect of infinite experience in the spirit of *responsibility* towards a shared existence, thereby placing the viewer and the object in relation to each other.[1] It is an understanding fueled by a balance between the binaries of emotion and reason. The shift toward subjectivism and constructions observed by Homer Page as well as Lange and Dixon in the 1950s ultimately involved a paradigmatic abandonment of the traditional conception of photography as a dialogical medium, as a means of communicating and clarifying aspects of our visible world,[2] because the epistemological value of photography itself was being fundamentally called into question.

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[1] The theoretical framework for photography as a relational aesthetic will be discussed further on. For an in-depth study on aspects of relationality in artistic practice cf. KRAUTZ 2017a.
[2] As an example cf., e.g. WHITE 1950 and his description of subjective photography as well as his conception of photography's relationship to reality.

3. Alienation from the Familiar: A Re-Definition of Photography

The key to understanding this shift can be found in the seminal essay *A Short History of Photography* written by Walter Benjamin (1972), which Henry Bond in his introduction to the Kindle edition calls »the Rosetta Stone of photo theory« (2011). It is in this essay, originally written in 1931, that Benjamin establishes his revolutionary and ideology-critical argumentation of photographic theory, one which he augments, if somewhat conflictingly, within a general aesthetic theory in his equally influential text on *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (2010). Described as »the single most significant essay in the quite slim canon of indispensable photo theory texts« (BOND 2011), *The Short History* offers an exemplary view into foundational ideas initiating the paradigmatic turn in photo theory. The following will examine how Benjamin succeeds in not only formulating an alternate conception of reality but also effectuating an essentially different practice as the one outlined above.

Benjamin's account of the history of photography is critically revisionist (cf. BENJAMIN 1972: 5–20). He argues that photography already entered a period of decline by the 1860s, when industrial technology superseded the pre-industrial daguerreotype. As a consequence, Benjamin considers the 19th century images produced by David Octavius Hill, Nadar, Margaret Cameron and others to already represent the apex of photography, as only these carry artistic value. Benjamin argues the daguerreotype's quality is derived from its particular process of production, whereby a slow exposure of light is needed to allow forms to unfold and become fixed on a copper plate, creating a unique and irreproducible picture. As a result, the daguerreotype image becomes endowed with a magical quality, one that reveals a space permeated by the unconscious, thus exhibiting aura, which he describes as »a peculiar web of space and time: the unique manifestation of a distance, however near it may be« (BENJAMIN 1972: 7, 20). He argues that, since fast exposure technology banished the quality of aura from the print, portrait photographers and Pictorialists in particular are guilty of inducing a forced simulation and commercialization of aura through mechanical reproduction techniques. For Benjamin this marks a sharp decline in taste and artistic value (cf. BENJAMIN 1972: 17–22).

Having established the questionable artistic quality of industrialized and pictorial photographs, Benjamin demands — in conformity with his ideology-critical standpoint — that theoretical discourse abandon ›photography as art‹ and consider the importance of its social function in fulfilling an explicit, revolutionary, social-scientific purpose (cf. BENJAMIN 1972: 21–23).[3] It is in this context that the images produced by August Sander and Karl Blossfeldt are mentioned as serving the »physiognomic, political and scientific interest« (BENJAMIN

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[3] Benjamin enters a passionate dialectic argumentation between *art as photography* and *photography as art* (cf. MITCHELL 2009), which provides the impetus for the development of art photography as we know it today. For an overview of art photography since the 1960s cf. CAMPANY 2007.

1972: 24), which — with particular emphasis on August Sander — are vitally necessary as an »atlas of instruction« in training and sharpening our awareness of the »shifts of power, to which we are now accustomed« (BENJAMIN 1972: 22). As a consequence, Benjamin sees social-scientific images as ultimately contributing to countering bourgeois aesthetics through a program of »exposure or construction« (BENJAMIN 1972: 24).

Benjamin further elaborates how the photographer Eugene Atget, with his empty cityscapes of Paris, is to be considered an important forerunner of revolutionary photography: Atget, Benjamin argues, was »the first to disinfect the stifling atmosphere spread by the conventional portrait photography« (BENJAMIN 1972: 20). In disinfecting or cleansing the stifling atmosphere of bourgeois aestheticism from his photographs, Atget furthermore »initiated the liberation of the object from the aura, which is the most incontestable achievement of the recent school of photography« (BENJAMIN 1972: 20). Since fast exposure photography banished aura from the picture just as an »increasing degeneration of the imperialist bourgeoisie« (BENJAMIN 1972: 19) banished aura from reality itself, Atget is lauded for tearing off his mask as a photographer and for stripping »reality of its camouflage« (BENJAMIN 1972: 20). Devoid of relational coordinates, Atget's photographs are considered to presage Surrealist constructions in which a »salutary estrangement between man and his surroundings« clears the way for »the politically trained eye before which all intimacies serve the illumination of the detail« (BENJAMIN 1972: 20). With this, Benjamin identifies detachment and estrangement as an effective program of photographic social critique.

Consequently, because industrial photography cannot be considered art under any circumstance, Benjamin negates the legitimacy of any photographic claim to artistic quality and production. He argues that, by donning the mask of artistic expression, photography loses sight of its social-scientific purpose, making it superficial as a consequence. For example, in Albert Renger-Patzsch's book *Die Welt ist Schön* [The World is Beautiful] ([1928] 1992), Benjamin sees unmasked

> a photography which is able to relate a tin of can soup to the universe, yet cannot grasp a single one of the human conditions in which the tin exists; a photograph which even in its most dreamlike compositions is more concerned with eventual saleability than with understanding (BENJAMIN 1972: 24).

Benjamin, quoting Brecht, denies that the aesthetic beauty of New Objectivity photography evinces any epistemic value: »less than at any time does a simple reproduction of reality tell us anything about reality« (BENJAMIN 1972: 24) Benjamin states: »When photography takes itself out of the contexts established by Sander, Krull or Blossfeldt and frees itself from physiognomic, political, and scientific interests, it becomes creative« (BENJAMIN 1972: 24). And in the face of far-reaching crises of contemporary society, Benjamin argues, the more creative photography is, the more it devolves to fetish. In this regard, the greatest danger to photography is its conception as an art form (cf. BENJAMIN 1972: 24).

With his *Short History* Benjamin debunks the traditional ideal that modern photography can communicate meaningful aspects of reality, because this

would imply an artistic dimension it is incapable of fulfilling. More so, any aesthetic claim can only serve a degenerate bourgeois purpose. As a result, photography must be cleansed from its capitalist conceptions through a counter program of estrangement or construction, thereby unmasking the socio-political realities which aestheticism would otherwise conceal.[4] One of the major consequences from this argumentation is that Benjamin not only delineates a restricted framework in which photography may be carried out, but he succeeds in redefining what reality is from the perspective of critical theory, thus limiting the term to social-economic conditions of power relations. The implications from this are not only theoretical: Benjamin sets the normative framework for a specific photographic practice in which photography's relationship to the world can only be viewed critically and where photography is conceded an exclusively revolutionary function of social critique (cf., e.g. MITCHELL 2009).

4. Plato's Cave and the Mistrust of Photography

In the book *The Cruel Radiance* by Susie Linfield (2012), the first chapter is dedicated to ›A Little History of Photography Criticism; or, Why do Photography Critics Hate Photography?‹. Linfield examines how Benjamin and other early critical theorists established a discourse in which photography is fundamentally viewed with mistrust, suspicion, anger, fear and hostility, an approach later theorists such as Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag have continued to reproduce. Linfield points out, however, that the discourse has been essentially informed by specific political-historical events of the early 20th century, which influenced Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer's and other's concept of the medium.[5] The fundamental awe with which critics such as Sontag and others adhere to these early theorists' approach appears remarkable in this light (cf. LINFIELD 2012: 16–12). For example, Susan Sontag's examination of various aspects and manifestations of photography in her book *On Photography* (1977) intimately echoes Benjamin's critical arguments. In the first chapter titled ›In Plato's Cave‹ (SONTAG 1977: 3–24), Sontag, for instance, fundamentally questions photography's ability to represent reality and generate understanding. Sontag states that photographs »lay claim to another reality« (SONTAG 1977: 16), that their »rendering of reality must always hide more than they disclose« (SONTAG 1977:23). Entertaining a »shady commerce between art and truth« (SONTAG 1977: 6), Sontag argues, photographs insert themselves between the individual and experience, replacing real experience with only a semblance or

[4] Benjamin's ideology-critical stance is to be understood within the context of the catastrophic power politics coming into play in the 1930s. It must be emphasized, however, that Benjamin introduces a very limited definition of reality, particularly photographic reality, paving the way for a largely conceptual approach to photography as we know it today.

[5] Linfield goes into greater detail with regard to Siegfried Kracauer and his formative effect on photography criticism. Although Kracauer is also a very important critical theorist of photography, this essay exclusively follows a strain of thought specifically established by Benjamin.

the appearance of participation: »Humankind lingers unregenerately in Plato's cave, still reveling, its age-old habit, in mere images of the truth« (SONTAG 1977: 3).

Paraphrasing Benjamin's quotation from Brecht, Sontag testifies that, since photographs are the »touchstones and confirmations of that reductive approach to reality which is considered realistic« (SONTAG 1977: 21), they have no meaningful experience to offer. Instead, she argues, the need to enhance reality and experience through photographs »is an aesthetic consumerism to which everyone is now addicted« (SONTAG 1977: 24). Where decades earlier Margaret Bourke-White conceived photographic truth as a soul searching process in which individual photographs augment an ever growing mosaic and enhance our understanding and perception of the world, Sontag sees the exact opposite:

> Photography reinforces a nominalist view of social reality as consisting of small units of an apparently infinite number — as the number of photographs that could be taken of anything are unlimited. Through photographs, the world becomes a series of unrelated, freestanding particles; and history, past and present, a set of anecdotes and *fait divers*. The photograph makes reality atomic, manageable and opaque. It is a view of the world which denies interconnectedness (SONTAG 1977: 3).

In Sontag's view, therefore, photographs maintain a »voyeuristic relation to the world which levels the meaning of all events« (SONTAG 1977: 11), they offer »the opposite of understanding« (SONTAG 1977: 23) because, as superficial renderings of visible reality, they can only reveal the status quo. As a consequence, any epistemic value gained from photographs must be discounted as imaginary; any experience to the contrary must be dismissed as aesthetic consumerism:

> The knowledge gained through still photographs will always be some kind of sentimentalism, whether cynical or humanist. It will be a knowledge at bargain prices—a semblance of knowledge, a semblance of wisdom; as the act of taking pictures is a semblance of appropriation, a semblance of rape (SONTAG 1977: 25).

Any claim to a relationship between image and reality in photography can therefore only be superficial; and instead of providing existential reference, photographs represent a predatory appropriation which lessens the intrinsic value of what is portrayed.

5. A Seismic Fissure in Photographic Theory: *The Family of Man* and its Reception

The primary assumption underlying the photo theoretical paradigm described above is that photography fundamentally fosters consumerist aestheticism and hides, rather than discloses reality. Hence, its relation and reference to real experience is considered generally suspect and rendered meaningless,

particularly when, in reference to Benjamin, it is severed from the social-critical connections it must exclusively serve. As a result, a reflexive approach to photographic meaning, in practice as well as theory, is admissible only within a self-referential or media-referential context in which the basis for its visual representation is exposed. In this light, pursuing ›truth‹ through photographs to increase our knowledge of the world in the manner of Bourke-White can only be viewed as an unacceptable absurdity. Equally, Lange's passionate understanding of photography as a highly dialogical and empathetic exploration of a shared world appears equally naive as well as embarrassingly sentimental and bourgeois. Benjamin's and critical theory's reformulation of photography's function, practice and its relation to reality therefore represents a paradigmatic shift away from, and fundamental rejection of, an established discourse as well as practice. Once the new ideology-critical paradigm became consolidated, any claim to a meaningful dialogical and resonant relationship to our visible reality through photography has been accordingly perceived as a historically obsolete conception of the 1950s.[6] Paradoxically, however, the new paradigm has failed to lay the issue of photography's epistemological value to ultimate rest. A most glaring example of this is provided by the sixty-year reception history of Edward Steichen's iconic *The Family of Man* exhibition, which offers a unique opportunity to examine how the theoretical ›untruth‹ of photography has created a huge dichotomy between theoretical-academic approaches on the one hand and audience reception and practice on the other.

Much has been written about the photo exhibition *The Family of Man*. However, with regard to the discourse outlined above, it is important to note that Edward Steichen, curator of *The Family of Man*, adhered to the conception that photography represented »a potent factor in increasing our knowledge in shaping our concept and understanding of everyday life« (STEICHEN 1950). *The Family of Man*, which opened to the public at MoMA in 1955, ultimately became one of the most popular exhibitions in the history of photography, one that subsequently travelled around the world and was seen by 9 million viewers by 1964. Interest in the exhibition has been continuous over six decades as the object of scholarship, albeit often in a very controversial context; neither has the exhibition completely disappeared from public view. In 1994 one of the original copies of the exhibition was permanently installed at Castle Clervaux in Luxemburg, where it has remained open to the public since.[7] Yet a major fault line can be traced along its reception history, dividing academic from general audience reception: While photo theorists and scholars have consistently negated the explicit epistemic dimension of the exhibition, they have equally consistently, and confusingly, been faced off by a popular reception, which, to a great extent, emphatically affirms the exhibition's generation of existential meaning (cf., e.g., BERLIER 1999).

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[6] For an example of this, cf BATE 2009, who ascribes a humanist approach in photography to a specific ideology of 1950s.
[7] In 2003 the exhibition was also included in the UNESCO World Memory List for its sustained cultural and historical significance.

Conceived as a comprehensive portrait of woman and mankind in 503 photographs, and organized in thematic sequences portraying existential issues such as love, marriage, birth, family, labor, war, peace, faith, injustice, etc., the exhibition intended to show universal human experiences which form the basis of human existence across all differences of class, race, culture, age or gender: »It is Photography [...] giving an account of itself. This is what it has done — it has made a record — a portrait of man« (Steichen as quoted in SANDEEN 1995: 57). Steichen was convinced that the exhibition serves as an »article of faith« to counter the violence, despair and confusion of the time (SANDEEN 1995: 57). To Steichen, photography represented the perfect medium »to explain man to man and each man to himself« (KROES 2007: 117). The show's innovative exhibition design allowed viewers to explore connections between images and sequences so that an understanding of human commonalities and basic human rights would be generated. Under the auspices of the USIA — and in the questionable service of U.S. Cold War cultural diplomacy — the show travelled across the US and to many foreign countries (cf. SANDEEN: 1995). Venues also included cities destroyed in World War II such as Berlin, Frankfurt, Nagasaki and Hiroshima, where the exhibition became an equally popular success.

Although no stranger to controversy from the very beginning,[8] the exhibition's impact on an entire generation of photographers, who were inspired by photography's ability to raise awareness for social issues, was uncontested (cf., e.g., TAUSK/TALBOT 1980). Renowned German photographers Arno Fischer and Evelyn Richter, for example, explicitly refer to *The Family of Man* as the most formative influence on their practice, as do many others of that generation.[9] Yet, significantly, the exhibition's appeal as communicating meaningful dimensions of life, as well as Steichen's desire that with it a contribution can be made to peaceful and compassionate human co-existence, led many (neo-)Marxist and postmodern photo theorists to sharply attack *The Family of Man* on fundamental levels. The first and most effective critique came from Roland Barthes in an essay written on »The Great Family of Man« (2006). In his essay, originally published in 1956, Barthes echoes Walter Benjamin's critical distrust of photographic aesthetic practice and rejects Steichen's vision as a humanist myth serving the bourgeois status quo. In addition, he argues that the photographs and their message remain superficial, exhibiting merely »gnomic truths« (BARTHES 2006: 101).

As a consequence, Barthes views the exhibition themes as purely tautological: As valuable to a deeper knowledge of humanity as zoological classifications are to an understanding of animal behavior, the idea of a shared

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[8] The initial controversy revolved primarily around the exhibition's popular approach and eschewal of high art, or purist aesthetics (cf. »The controversial Family of Man« 1955, until Roland Barthes' (2006) scathing critique predominated.

[9] Cf. http://www.galerie-himmel.de/de/Ausstellungen/Evelyn-Richter-Arno-Fischer-Ursula-Ar-nold/Evelyn-Richter.html or http://www.mdbk.de/filead-min/Redaktion/PDF/Presse/2016/MdbK_Pressemappe_Arnold_Fischer_Richter_gesamt.pdf [accessed October 25, 2020].

human condition cannot provide insight into human coexistence. On the contrary, the show's claim to a universal humanity only serves to consolidate bourgeois conceptions and power relations, and blatantly ignores historical realities. Barthes writes:

> Everything here, the content and appeal of the pictures, the discourse which justifies them, aims to suppress the determining weight of History: we are held back at the surface of an identity, prevented precisely by sentimentality from penetrating into this ulterior zone of human behavior where historical alienation introduces some ‚differences' which we shall here quite simply call ›injustices‹ (BARTHES 2006: 101).

Barthes' critique of *The Family of Man* unequivocally mirrors Benjamin's paradigm and interprets the show's aesthetically sentimentalized humanist view as a capitalist construction bearing little relation to the real world. Steichen's conviction that the photographs in the exhibition contribute to self-understanding, and to an understanding of one's relationship to humanity, is rejected outright as an adamist myth. His appraisal maintains a reductive, ideology-critical concept of reality as exclusively structured by power relations. It is this view which determinatively carries over into how the exhibition has been approached since, which was further aggravated by the exhibition's propagandistic instrumentalization in the 1950s when, as part of the USIA's program of ›cultural diplomacy‹, it was sent to many parts of the world (cf. SEKULA 1981; GRESH 2016; SANDEEN 1995).

   Barthes' appraisal of *The Family of Man* proved seminal to later reviews of the exhibition, particularly as of the early 1980s after his widely popular book *Mythologies* was published in various languages. Every evaluation since conforms to Barthes' basic argumentation, whereby *The Family of Man*'s major impact on photo history is consistently viewed with embarrassment and puzzlement.[10] In Michel Frizot's *New History of Photography* (1999), for instance, while the show is characterized as the highpoint of social interest photography, its simplistic and reductive world view is also considered to illustrate the limits of that particular genre (cf. GAUTRAND 1999: 628; 1998: 628).[11] This assessment is consistently replicated with little variation in the academic reception of *The Family of Man*. Blake Stimson, for example, in his 2006 evaluation explains that scholarship has effectively proved *The Family of Man* to represent a »reaffirmation of the time-honored petty bourgeois life philosophy of a sentimental, expressive, and essentially private subject« (STIMSON 2006: 60).

   In recent history, an anthology of texts titled *The Family of Man 1955-2001. Humanism and Postmodernism* (BACK/SCHMIDT-LINSENHOFF 2004) explicitly contextualizes and deconstructs the exhibition on the basis of Barthes' critique. This is particularly tangible in the essays' fundamental rejection of the exhibition's humanism and its consistent appeal to the public. Exhibitions such as *this is new york* (2001), which were modeled on idea of *The Family of Man* and organized to reaffirm human identity in response to overwhelming human

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[10] Cf. for instance TIFENTÄLE 2018.
[11] Gautrand's text in the English edition is, interestingly enough, less explicitly derogative than in the German edition.

challenges of modernity, are equally designated naïve or trivial (cf. SCHMIDT-LINSENHOFF 2004a). Moreover, any sense of identification with the images is equated with enjoying a soap opera (cf. SCHMIDT-LINSENHOFF 2004a: 10). The most recent publication on *The Family of Man*, released in 2018, has sought to lessen the sharp edges of Barthesian appraisals, arguing that Steichen's conception represents a form of progressive humanism, without, however, contesting the applicability of Barthes' theoretical premises (cf. HURM/REITZ/ZAMIR 2018).

6. Identity in Non-Identity

Interestingly enough, a fellow critical theorist, Max Horkheimer, offers a radically different interpretation of *The Family of Man* as well as approach to photography. Undetected until recently, his ideas failed to have impact on the exhibition's reception history or the overall discourse on photography, although they open essential possibilities neglected until now.[12] Horkheimer states:

> Like no other aesthetic event of the recent past [the show] has ... provided stimulus and created enduring memories. It represents a symbol of shared human bonds in the face of political fragmentation, of essential sameness despite differences in individual, national character, or, as we philosophers are wont to say, of identity in non-identity (HORKHEIMER 1989: 31).[13]

To Horkheimer the photographs in *The Family of Man* impart world knowledge, they »lead to people and objects« (HORKHEIMER 1989: 35), and »guide one's view to the familiar unfamiliar, allowing the viewer to enter into a new and more sensitive relationship to things« (HORKHEIMER 1989: 36). In his assessment, which is drawn heavily from Kantian philosophy (cf. JAY 2018), viewing and reflecting on the images in the exhibition promotes a significant understanding of identity, of one's individual relationship to the world. In this light, deriving meaning from the thematic sequences of photographs appears neither trivial nor sentimental but *relational*: it provides a significant opportunity to reflect on existential issues and how these pertain to one's self and to one's relationship to others and the world (cf., e.g., FERRETTI-THEILIG/KRAUTZ 2017). This generates the kind of »human perspective« Dorothea Lange spoke of. Horkheimer recognizes that the exhibition is explicitly not a naive proclamation of human equality by which it ignores the historically real and culturally, politically economically induced differences as Barthes claims, but instead allows human identity to become visible through the passageway of non-identity: Humanity as a

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[12] The text represents a speech Max Horkheimer held on the occasion of the *The Family of Man* exhibition opening in Frankfurt in 1956.

[13] Quotations translated by the author. Although HUM et al. 2018 provides a translation of the text, in the estimation of this author it appears to dilute the original at certain neuralgic points. The original reads: »Wie kaum ein anderes ästhetisches Ereignis der jüngsten Zeit hat sie [...] Anregung gebracht und Erinnerungen gestiftet, die lange dauern werden. Sie bildet ein Symbol für die Zusammengehörigkeit der Menschen bei aller politischen Zerrissenheit, für die Selbigkeit ihres Wesens trotz der Verschiedenheit ihres individuellen und nationalen Charakters, oder, wie wir Philosophen zu sagen pflegen, für die Identität des Menschen in der Nichtidentität« (HUM et al. 2018).

genus as seen in light of its basic existential dimensions. This experience, however, is predicated on the viewer being able to understand and place herself in an identifying relationship to humanity and not holding herself outside of it as if it were alien to her (cf. FERRETTI-THEILIG/KRAUTZ 2017).

Horkheimer's theoretical assessment also accurately describes the experience many visitors to the exhibition reported in publicly accessible documents. Numerous newspaper articles from the 1950s as well as interviews taken during *The Family of Man*'s world tour show that reactions to the exhibition's humanist vision are generally very positive ones (cf. OFFICE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS 1956; UNITED STATES EMBASSY 1955; SANDEEN 1995). For example, the majority of visitor responses written in exhibition guest books at Castle Clervaux in Luxemburg represent appreciative sentiments, many of which exhibit a high degree of reflective quality (cf. STEICHEN COLLECTIONS 1994–2010). This and other sources show that, with a few exceptions, viewers explicitly understood and agreed with the portrait of humanity presented, which intimately corroborated with their own life experience (cf. BERLIER 1999). Moreover, many responses show that viewing the photographs in the exhibition provided important existential insights. One visitor to the exhibition in Clervaux writes, for example:

> An exposition which reminds us that every person carries the whole of humanity with him. It is enough to open one's eyes to discover the beauty and love (STEICHEN COLLECTIONS 1994–2010: 7).[14]

And another states:

> This exhibition touches deep points of recognition and understanding… One gets the idea what it means to be human (STEICHEN COLLECTIONS 1994–2010: 8).[15]

These statements and many others exemplify the kind of experience Horkheimer philosophically describes as »identity in non-identity«: By placing oneself in relation to humanity as a whole, the viewer recognizes her own humanity. Consequently, the photographs in the exhibition not only seem to ›speak‹ of humanity but *speak as* humanity (cf. FERRETTI-THEILIG/KRAUTZ 2017), which the viewer maintains an antecedent relation to. These responses imply that humanity is not constructed but recognized, that what the images portray makes resonance on the basis of real and shared world experiences — or an experience of human »sameness« — possible.

Critics who base their appraisal on the ideology-critical and postmodern paradigm outlined above fail to recognize this dimension of meaning because its premises only allow for a very limited window of referentiality:

> For the essential interest — and the greatest weakness — of The Family of Man is, in fact, above all its aesthetic. Its aesthetic is pictorial … and excludes any radically photographic

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[14] Translated by the author. The original reads: »Une exposition que nous rappelle que chaque homme porte en lui toute l'humanité. Il suffit d'ouvrir les yeux, pour en découvrir la Beauté et l'Aimer [sic]«.

[15] Translated by the author. The original reads: »Diese Ausstellung berührte tiefe Punkte des Erkennens und Verstehens. Sehr impressiv. Man bekommt eine Ahnung davon was es heißt ein Mensch zu sein.«

approach. [...] In itself the medium [of photography] has no message other than the affirmation of its identity (CAUJOLLE 2004: 191).

Where critics see weakness and tautology in lieu of social critique, however, viewer commentaries mention significant experiences in the sense of Horkheimer, ones which, emerging from a reflection and deeper contemplation of the pictures, point toward a shared world that extends beyond, or more correctly, passes *through* what is materially portrayed by the photographs:

> They showed so much, and they told so much, these pictures, these photographs ... told so much about modern life, my life. [...] [I discovered] let's say the power, yeah, of what photography can do (RICHTER 2012: 4:40–5:01).

7. Detachment as Methodological Flaw

The above discrepancy between a theoretical and practical reception of *The Family of Man* is illustrative of two diametrically opposed approaches to photography. We have also seen that Benjamin, Barthes and Sontag, as representatives of the dominant photo-theoretical paradigm, maintained an attitude of unequivocal critical detachment towards photography based on a fundamental suspicion of its industrial-commercial mode of visual representation. In contrast, Steichen's conception and the documented audience responses were inspired by an understanding of photography as a reflexive process of viewing, whereby dimensions of meaning are generated by dialogical interaction between the viewer and the image. This aspect is explicitly mentioned in viewer commentaries as well:

> You must see this exhibition on your own. In effect, it demands observation and concentration first, then reflection and sometimes meditation. Leave immediately to share your impressions and emotions with a friend (STEICHEN COLLECTIONS 1994–2010: 11).[16]

Another reads:

> The exhibition thrives on dialogue! ... It's enough to cry, laugh, smile and think and be sad. And there is no lack of color at all! The pictures are black and white, but still they are vibrantly colorful (STEICHEN COLLECTIONS 1994–2010: 12).[17]

The dichotomy between scholarship and audience reception points to a basic problem of methodology: The Marxist-postmodern paradigm's *a priori* distrust of visual representation acts as an insurmountable obstacle to apprehending the exhibition's epistemological significance. As a result, the interpretation it generates must necessarily find itself in stark contrast to a reception practice which embraces dialogical responsivity (cf. FERRETTI-THEILIG/KRAUTZ

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[16] Translated by the author. The original reads: »Il faut voir cette exposition seul. En effet, elle demande observation et concentration d'abord, réflexion et parfois méditation en[s]uite. Quitte à partarger ses impressions et emotions immédiament après, avec un(e) ami(e)«.
[17] Translated by the author. The original reads: »Die Ausstellung lebt vom Dialog! Herrlich! Zum Weinen, Lachen, und Schmunzeln und Nachdenken und traurig sein. Und kein bisschen fehlt die Farbe! Die Bilder sind schwarz-weiß u. doch schillernd bunt«.

2017). An alienating view disconnects viewers from the subject portrayed and the world both share; it is an impossible view from outside, which only simulates objectivity (cf. KRAUTZ 2017b): In the classical sense, the only one capable of maintaining an external view is God. Steichen's comprehensive portrait of a shared human existence unfolds in an engaged and responsive contemplation of the photographs. Their content is experienced and understood through a conscious willingness to let the images unfold in a process of mimesis and deixis (cf. FERRETTI-THEILIG/KRAUTZ 2017). The dimension of meaning evidently available to viewers appears inaccessible to scholarship because the ideology-critical premises guiding its appraisals restrict it from responsive dialogue.

From its refusal to seriously consider the images as a dialogical space, it follows that scholarship has failed to examine the exhibition sequences within the context they were placed; their interpretations remain unsubstantiated methodologically within the framework of formal examination of placement, composition etc.[18] Once undertaken, formal analysis would reveal that the thematic sequences and photographs are neither tautological nor superficial but are equivalent to a philosophical contemplation of existential issues generated by an interconnection of individual images through reflection and imagination (cf. FERRETTI-THEILIG/KRAUTZ 2017). Formal analysis of *The Family of Man* reveals that by »thinking visually« the idea of humanity — the human condition — unfolds as a vital experience in the exhibition, and that the importance of human compassion is made evident because it too becomes a tangible experience (cf. FERRETTI-THEILIG/KRAUTZ 2017).

8. Photo-Theoretical Consequences

As a consequence, the controversy identified in *The Family of Man*'s reception history calls for a reconsideration of the fundamental premise underlying the photo-theoretical paradigm, and has already resulted in re-examining photography in the context of a relational aesthetic (cf. FERRETTI-THEILIG/KRAUTZ 2017; KRAUTZ 2017a). This in effect shifts the theoretical discourse toward an understanding of image production, hence also photography in particular, as an expression of human sociality and being-in-the-world, whereby the co-existential dimensions of a reflexive self, co-existing others, and a shared cosmos are negotiated (cf. FERRETTI-THEILIG/KRAUTZ 2017: 6–17). On this background photography appears intrinsically related to the world. Anchored in a world that is shared by all, photography provides meaning of the visible; by sharing meaning and offering the experience of meaning it fulfills an ontological function (cf. FERRETTI-THEILIG/KRAUTZ 2017; KRAUTZ 2014, 2004).

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[18] Every appraisal of *The Family of Man* since Barthes has at most extracted individual images, with little regard for the context they were placed, and used to appraise the exhibition as a whole. For an example of this cf. SCHMIDT-LINSENHOFF 2004b and SEKULA 1981 in particular. Another very recent example in this vein is WALTHER (undated).

With this approach, the former paradigm's binary fissure between image and reality, emotion and reason, is overcome and the estrangement between viewer and the world resolved. Instead of taking a (fictive) outside stance to expose the truth behind the picture — thus also treating photographic images with distrust and detachment — adopting a conception of the world as a field of co-existence allows for a far more comprehensive understanding of reality, the dimensions of which photographs help to negotiate. Through a dialogical process of seeing and understanding, photographs make world experience visible; and the ability to make more of experience visible is connected to the level of resonance the photographer maintains, as the statements from the 1950s' discourse disclose.

Kaja Silverman, in her introduction to *The Miracle of Analogy* (2015) comes to a similar conclusion. She describes photography as fundamentally analogous:

> It is, rather, the world's primary way of revealing itself to us — of demonstrating that it exists, and that it will far exceed us. Photography is also an ontological calling card: it helps us to see that each of us is a node in a vast constellation of analogies. When I say ›analogy‹, I do not mean sameness, symbolic equivalence, logical adequation or even a rhetorical relationship [...] I am talking about the authorless and untranscendable similarities that structure Being [...] and that give everything the same ontological weight (SILVERMAN 2015: 10–11).

Silverman's conception of photography as analogy (cf. also KRAUTZ 2017b; 2004; SPAEMANN 2017) emphasizes photography's ontologically significant, epistemologically relevant and relational link to reality. In comparison to the passing paradigm, Silverman's conception allows for a more complex purpose of photography which includes forcing acknowledgement of what we would otherwise like to ignore:

> Photography is the vehicle through which these profoundly enabling but unwelcome relationships are revealed to us, and through which we learn to think analogically. It is able to disclose the world, show us that it is structured by analogy, and help us to assume our place within it because it, too, is analogical (SILVERMAN 2015: 11).

In effect Silverman also rejects the *a priori* detachment maintained by the passing paradigm. Her statement, »photography develops, rather, with us, and in response to us« (SILVERMAN 2015: 11), therefore corresponds well with the considerations for a relational theory and practice of photography as outlined above.

9. Thinking the New Paradigm: Photography as an Ethical Way of Seeing

The above has shown that the theoretical discourse on photography is changing and that photography's relation to the visible world is being reconsidered on fundamental levels. This shift involves a greater understanding of photography in its most comprehensive dimensions and within meaningful contexts

of social practice. In his introduction to the book *Photography Changes Everything*, Marvin Heiferman (2012) attests to the fact that, although photography plays an essential role in almost every aspect of life, its comprehensive history — with the exception of art photography — has been virtually ignored. He states:

> Given the pivotal role the medium plays in describing and transforming our lives, it is a mistake to take photographic imaging lightly or for granted. Conventional perspectives about the history, authority, and consequences of photography need to be revisited (HEIFERMAN 2012: 20).

The book continues to illustrate what photo critics have viewed with suspicion since Benjamin: Photography is capable of putting almost every aspect of our visible experience into perspectives which impact and change the way we see the world. Rethinking photography within the parameters of relationality would, however, enable us to grasp and reflect on photography's existential relevance in a far more constructive light.

One such significant reconsideration of photography has recently been provided by Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites in their book *The Public Image. Photography and Civic Spectatorship* (2016), in which photography is examined in the context of an essential social practice of public discourse. The first chapter »Climbing out of Plato's Cave« addresses conventional theory's misconceptions and reductive approach while introducing an alternate concept of democratic spectatorship through photography:

> Spectatorship is not a series of behavioral reactions; it is an extended social relationship that works more like a process of attunement or affective alignment than a logic of direct influence. Thus photography offers a way of being in the world with others (HARIMAN/LUCAITES 2016: 15).

Instead of rejecting the radical plurality of interpretation offered by photographic images, Hariman and Lucaites embrace the possibility it offers to unlock potential dimensions of meaning depending on the contexts they can be viewed in, which they proceed to demonstrate throughout the book. In so doing they provide important insights into how realism and imagination, traditionally considered binary antagonisms of photography, are effectively entwined to allow for »a richer sense of realism« involving a »capacious affirmation of a deeply ethical way of seeing« (HARIMAN/LUCAITES 2016: 94).

Hariman's and Lucaites' argument for photography as an »ethical way of seeing« provides an important alternative to the conventional paradigm's conception of it as a flawed medium caught between art and truth. It forms the cornerstone of their comprehensive conception of photography as an abundant art, one that reflects the very abundance of life itself; not in the sense of capitalist material production, but in the sense of the complexities of the world and the infinite relationships it engenders (cf. HARIMAN/LUCAITES 2016: 227–260):

> Photography reveals a different conception of meaning: one that is multifold, plural, continually being augmented and altered through production that is excessive and necessarily so (HARIMAN/LUCAITES 2016: 235).

Based on Paul Feyerabend's concept of richness of being (cf. FEYERA-BEND/TERPSTRA 1999), this approach avoids oversimplification and calls for plurality and inclusion, where nothing is excluded: »The oversupply of images testifies to a common world in which there should be room for everyone« (HARIMAN/LUCAITES 2016: 242). Photographic abundance produces a comprehensive archive of images which not only documents and allows abundance to become visible to us, but reflects the complexity and richness of our visible world, while also providing us with the opportunity to perceive and understand it:

> The point isn't that there's a big world out there but rather that photography's peculiar combination of mimesis and abstraction allows the plenitude, energy, and interdependence of the cosmos to emerge within the spectrum of human visibility. [...] Photography might offer an aesthetic experience that is both playful and serious, capable of moral extension because of how it already combines representational identification and analogical inference (HARIMAN/LUCAITES 2016: 253).

Hariman's and Lucaites' conception of photography as a public art predicated on democratic spectatorship intrinsically corresponds with the idea of a relational pictorial practice outlined above. Argued from the basis of an ethics of abundance, which acknowledges the dignity of life and emphasizes inclusion and cooperation rather than exclusivity and possessiveness (HARIMAN/LUCAITES 2016: 247–248), it also provides a significant contribution toward countering conventional concerns about photography and public manipulation, or social control, without denying that the possibility exists. However, by making infinite details of life and ways of being in the world visible, photographs importantly call the spectator to participate in a shared world. And through spectatorship the abundance of photographs would also be able to reveal critical problems and foster a mode of seeing capable of identifying misuses of abundance and helping to counter radical simplifications which threaten civic life (HARIMAN/LUCAITES 2016: 248–258). »Instead of looking for how an image might create a decisive effect, there is need to consider how this medium of abundance makes specific capabilities for reflection available to ordinary people« (HARIMAN/LUCAITES 2016: 258). The authors conclude: »Photography prompts us to consider how the still image mirrors unseen radiance, and how the ever-expanding archive promises a world that has enough for everyone« (HARIMAN/LUCAITES 2016: 260).

The new, emerging paradigm does not conceive of photography as fostering a nominalist view of social reality, nor does it deny interconnectedness. Although motivated by a deep concern for social justice, Sontag's claim to photography's reductive epistemic significance cannot hold. On the contrary, photography as a relational practice, drawing from an infinite source of possible references to our visible world, is indeed capable of promoting identity and connectedness, of providing a better and more comprehensive understanding of reality, as *The Family of Man*'s audience reception history demonstrates. In their contemplation of numerous photographs, Hariman and Lucaites (2016) have shown that, instead of being just a poor substitute for knowledge or

experience, still images offer a rich field for knowledge to be gained in a multitude of contexts. They have also correctly identified the need to examine more closely how the medium works in particular. Heiferman concurs:

> We know that photographs work, but not quite how they do. We pay lip service to visual literacy, but don't bother to teach it. In schools, at home or work, in our day-to-day lives, we don't give much time or thought to assessing what makes photography such an effective medium. We should (HEIFERMAN 2012: 15).

Once photography is understood as an essential social practice as outlined above, the question of photographic responsibility arises, hence an ethics of photography becomes intrinsic to that practice. Where Sontag identifies ethical weakness in the medium itself, however, Hariman and Lucaites, for instance, point to an ethics of abundance, one that promotes respect for life and human dignity. And because of the co-existential dimensions photographic images negotiate, an ethics of photography may also be perceived as grounded in an interpersonal and social practice, one which, because of photography's proximity to our visible world, holds the affirmative power to assure viewers of their existence in this world (cf. FERRETTI-THEILIG/KRAUTZ 2017; KRAUTZ 2014); a potential that visual literacy can only increase.[19]

10. Conclusion: Back Toward the Future

The above conception of photography as abundance offering a rich archive from which a greater understanding of the world and its complexity is derived, and the meaning of the visible is revealed, brings us back to the theoretical as well as practical approaches of the 1950s, as outlined at the beginning of this paper. It resonates with Bourke-White's (1950) description of photographic truth as a growing mosaic providing us with increasing skill to see and make better pictures. It explicitly involves the kind of photographic responsibility and empathetic-dialogical approach formulated by Lange and Dixon (1952). Lange's sense of responsibility to a shared world as a photographer stands in fundamental alignment with the relational view of photography as co-existential practice (cf. KRAUTZ 2014). The historical overview also served to show how conventional photo theory, as initiated and developed by Benjamin and others, failed to acknowledge the breadth, depth and vitality of photography's practice and impact. Because of the paradigm's exclusive focus on social critique and concern with ideological manipulation and social control, it was incapable of accommodating the vital experiences photography provided in art, visual communication and everyday life. Moreover, it may be argued that due to conventional theory's iconoclastic approach to photography, the opportunity to foster greater proficiency in the kind of democratic spectatorship Hariman and Lucaites call for was overlooked. There is a tangibly growing demand, therefore,

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[19] RUNGE 2019 for instance describes education through photography, using *The Family of Man* as an example, as a means of teaching visual literacy in university seminars.

to complete a comprehensive re-orientation in photographic theory — one which addresses the complexity of photographic production and reception, and which underlines its resonance with reality — because, to quote Margaret Bourke-White, »photography is as big as life itself« (BOURKE-WHITE 1950).[20]

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[20] In this context a recent Bloomsbury publication by Grant Scott (2020) *New Ways of Seeing. The Democratic Language of Photography* offers an interesting re-imagination of digital photography as »art and a language«.

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