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THE FAMILY OF MAN. Education Through Photography, Travelling in Time and Space. Teaching Visual Literacy in Seminars, Artistic Tutorials, and Field Research 2019

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Evelyn Runge

***The Family of Man.* Education
Through Photography, Travelling in
Time and Space. Teaching Visual
Literacy in Seminars, Artistic
Tutorials, and Field Research**

Abstract

Die *Family of Man* ist eine der berühmtesten Fotoausstellungen aller Zeiten. Seit 1994 wird das letzte erhaltene Original in Luxemburg öffentlich ausgestellt. Während Wissenschaftler*innen *The Family of Man* jahrzehntelang als sentimental und stereotyp abgetan haben, nutzten Lehrer*innen die Ausstellung schon früh zur Vermittlung visueller Kompetenzen. Dieser Artikel stellt drei Lehrveranstaltungen über *The Family of Man* vor: ein Seminar, ein künstlerisch-praktisches Tutorial und eine Exkursion mit Feldforschung zur Ausstellung in Clervaux, Luxemburg. Es wird argumentiert, dass *The Family of Man* heute noch wichtig und gut geeignet ist, um visuelle Kompetenzen an der Schnittstelle von Fotogeschichte, Fototheorie und Ausstellungsdesign zu vermitteln.

The Family of Man is one of the most famous photo exhibitions of all times. Since 1994, the last remaining original is exhibited publicly in Luxembourg. Whereas scholars have dismissed *The Family of Man* for decades as sentimental and stereotypical, teachers embraced it early on for its potential to instruct visual literacy. This article presents a set of three courses about *The Family of Man*, including a seminar, a practical tutorial, and an excursion to the exhibition in Clervaux, Luxembourg. It argues that *The Family of Man* is

nowadays still important for teaching visual literacy at the intersection of photo history, photo theory, and exhibition design.

Introduction

The Family of Man is one of the most well-known and most influential photo exhibitions of the 20th century, and a project of superlatives: one curator, 273 photographers from 68 countries, 503 selected photographs (out of four million), five million sold catalogues, and nine million visitors worldwide (cf. ZAMIR/HURM 2018). It was created by photographer Edward Steichen. *The Family of Man* was initially exhibited in 1955 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, after four years of planning (cf. BURDEN 1954). It was followed by several travelling exhibitions to almost every continent.

In this article, I discuss the use of the *The Family of Man* as an educational tool for visual literacy, based on six courses for undergraduate students of a variety of cultural studies and aesthetic communication, with majors such as theatre studies, media studies, philosophy, art, musicology and creative writing. The courses were offered as triples: one seminar, one practical (artistic) tutorial, and one excursion to *The Family of Man* in Luxemburg. It was mandatory to participate at the seminar and the tutorial—for theoretical, methodological, and historical background of the exhibition—before joining the excursion for field research.

I argue that the contemporary exhibition and adjustment of *The Family of Man* also today stand an important pedagogical value for the current classroom. Nowadays, *The Family of Man's* multi-layered history and the critical discourse throughout the past decades offer an abundance of possibilities for teaching, including a visit in the exhibition in Luxemburg to explore the differences and similarities of the design for a contemporary audience compared to the exhibition's original design in the Museum of Modern Art (1955). It still has the great potential to bridge theory and practice in university classrooms, and to reflect on visual literacy especially in an era of globalized images. Steichen's idea of travelling exhibitions must be understood as an early form of images' globalization and serves also to address current issues of the digital visual culture, and the status of photojournalism.

In this article, I firstly present an overview about the history of *The Family of Man*, and the revolving critique that only recently got a new twist due to the discovery of long-time overseen material by Max Horkheimer, and its interpretation by contemporary scholars (cf. HURM/REITZ/ZAMIR 2018). Secondly, I refer to *The Family of Man* in education: it is not well known that teachers used *The Family of Man* as an integral part of their classes and referred to it very positively. Thirdly, I present my learning objectives of *The Family of Man* and visual literacy.

1. *The Family of Man* in History and Theory

Curator Edward Steichen wanted *The Family of Man* to help create a more peaceful world, and he believed in education through photography. For him, photography can be understood coherently all over the world: »This is the irrefutable proof that photography is a universal language; that it speaks to all people; that people are hungry for that kind of language« (STEICHEN 1958: 167). Steichen was born in 1879 in Luxemburg and immigrated to the US two years later. Steichen worked as a pictorialist, fashion photographer, war photographer, and journalist. In 1947, aged 68, he was appointed director of the newly formed photography department of the Museum for Modern Art in New York City. He retired in 1962 and died in 1973.

It took Edward Steichen four years to prepare *The Family of Man*—from 1951 to 1955. He wanted to educate people all over the world to make it a better place, to foster equality and peace. 37 themes guided the viewer through the exhibition, including for instance birth, love, family, death, hunger, work, migration, dance, dream, fear, and hope. In the time of Cold War, Edward Steichen wanted his exhibition to travel—and it did, from New York City, to Munich in Germany, Mumbai in India, Moscow in the Soviet Union, to Guatemala City, to Japan and many more places, in total around 150 cities and 48 countries all over the globe. Since 25 years *The Family of Man* has found its public home in Clervaux, a village in the Ardennes, in the northern part of Luxemburg. Steichen himself gave it as a gift to the state of Luxemburg, his country of origin, and it is »the last complete set of the travelling version« (REITZ 2018: 177). It was stored in an attic—and forgotten from 1965 until 1989. Then Jean Back, the former director of the CNA, rediscovered it and took care of its first restoration. Since 1994, *The Family of Man* is accessible for the public in Luxemburg. The Centre National de l'Audiovisuel (CNA) oversees the presentation and restoration of the »greatest photo exhibition of all time« as Steichen considered his work. The CNA took a great effort in terms of conservation, architecture and sensitive modernization of the exhibition. It enables new generations of viewers to gain access to *The Family of Man*, and to learn about (photo) history, emotional inflow, and the art of installation design.

On a theoretical level, Steichen was criticized from early on for his approach to use photography, photo exhibitions and an affordable priced catalogue as educational tools. One of the main critiques setting the tone was Roland Barthes in 1957. He called the humanism of *The Family of Man* sentimental and moralizing. Birth, death, and work are universal facts, according to Barthes, and therefore self-evident for human communities (cf. BARTHES 1972). Barthes does not discuss a single photo in detail—he might not have been interested at all in close reading. It is possible that he criticised it based on the brochure published for the exhibition in Paris in 1957: scholars assume that Barthes himself never saw *The Family of Man* (cf. GUITTARD 2006; HURM 2018). Nevertheless, Barthes influential critique of humanistic photography survived over decades. Successive scholars described *The Family of Man* as

propaganda, paid by US aid, fostering heteronormative and patriarchal life style »to legitimate a family-based consumerism« (SEKULA 1981: 20).

At the moment, photo-researchers and photo-theorists re-read *The Family of Man* and reconsider its humanistic intentions very positively (cf. SANDEEN 1995; GUITTARD 2006; TURNER 2012; AZOULAY 2013; RUNGE 2012; RUNGE 2016; FERRETTI-THEILIG/KRAUTZ 2017; HURM/REITZ/ZAMIR 2018). Especially Hurm et al. emphasize the importance of Max Horkheimer's inaugural address to the exhibition in Frankfurt in 1958 as an empathetic approach to *The Family of Man* (cf. HORKHEIMER 2018; JAY 2018). One explanation for the growing interest in *The Family of Man* might be that visual crisis-reporting about refugees in Europe enhanced in general a more positive attitude towards social-documentary photography.

2. Teaching (With) *The Family of Man*

Photography in the 1950s was a newly discovered art, both for and in museums, and as well for university classroom (cf. HAZARD/HAZARD 1959; DESCHIN 1960; SMITH 1976). Teachers praised *The Family of Man* as brilliant tool from the 1950s onwards: Educators from the field of arts, English and American literature used *The Family of Man* for educational purposes about literature, art, and social interaction through photographing (BELOFF 1983). Their approach is affirmative, and hence differs from the critics' opinions. The teachers point out the humanistic character—both of their work, and Steichen's photo exhibition. These observations are based on research in pedagogical journals from 1959 until 1996.

Without using the term visual literacy at that time, the teachers' proposals resemble on contemporary teaching in higher education. For example, the educators suggested that their students take their own photographs and thus learn new skills and apply visual competence (cf. HAZARD/HAZARD 1959, 1961). The teachers were aware of the potential to combine literacy and visual literacy, suggesting writing exercises based on *The Family of Man* to enable students to change perspectives, in taking over other persons' viewpoints, and in selecting pictures (cf. SKINNER 1971). The visual skills of interpreting photographs should help students to identify humanistic values (cf. BUSH 1959; FOSTER 1959; LINDENFELD 1972). »Some of the best things that man has felt, thought, and said are studied with the following dual purpose in mind: to instill [sic] in the students a thoughtful, respectful attitude and an appreciation of the spiritual and intellectual attainments and potentialities of man as he strives to understand himself and his relationship to God, humanity, and the universe; and to show the oneness of man, wherever he has been in the past, wherever he is in the present, and wherever he indicates he may be in the future« (BUSH 1959: 208).

Due to its fairly low price, the catalogue of *The Family of Man* was affordable for the use in classrooms, for instance as textbook for English classes

(cf. HAZARD/HAZARD 1959, 1961). Besides that, teachers recommended visual and photographic essays in magazines for teaching: »The photography magazines deserve a place in the classroom for the perspective they give. Photography would seem to have the greatest unexploited possibilities in the English curriculum both because excellent models are cheaply come by and because it is as almost cheap for individuals to »take up« the art themselves« (HAZARD/HAZARD 1961: 290). Teachers are aware of the potential to combine literacy and visual literacy, suggesting writing exercises based on *The Family of Man* to enable students to change perspectives, equally in writing style, in taking over other persons' viewpoints, and in selecting pictures (cf. SKINNER 1971).

Art schools in the 1950s even went to see the *Family of Man*'s exhibition at the MoMA and met Steichen in person (cf. BALLINGER 1956). Teachers also encouraged the use of photography by students to produce their own essays and reports (HAZARD 1959): »In addition, many of these photos can serve as a starting point for student compositions and poems« (DANKER 1973: 397).

3. Course Description

I taught six courses solely on *The Family of Man* in summer 2013 and 2015, at Hildesheim University in Germany. The courses were offered as triples: one seminar, one practical (artistical) tutorial, and one excursion to *The Family of Man* in Luxemburg. It was mandatory to participate at the seminar and the tutorial—for theoretical, methodological, and historical background of the exhibition—to join the excursion. The target audience were undergraduate students (B.A.) in the department for Cultural Studies and Aesthetic Communication. The University of Hildesheim embraces theory-and-practice-approaches, so it was important to offer seminars, artistic tutorials, and excursions to meet practitioners in the field, such as curators, museum directors, photo- and film restorers, to give an impression what professions could be of interest for the students. The visit offered an embodied experience of the exhibition design and helped the students to reflect about changes of the perception and understanding of photos within the context of a museum, comparing the first public version of 1955 and the restored and adapted version of 2013. In 2013, 35 students participated in my seminar, and more than 20 participated in the artistic tutorial and the excursion. In 2015, approximately 16 students participated in the seminar, the tutorial and the excursion. Most of the students claimed it was their first course ever on photography whereas some of them participated in previous courses about photography, in the art history department, or the media department.

4. Goals of the Activity and Learning Objectives

The Family of Man's multi-layered history and the critical discourse throughout the past decades offer an abundance of possibilities for teaching, including a visit in the exhibition in Luxemburg. *The Family of Man* offers a wide range of topics and themes that can be explained and explored through the images—as singles and in the framework of the curated series of the exhibition —, the exhibition design of the original version in the Museum of Modern Art (1955) and the new one in Clervaux (2013), the academic and public discourse about the exhibition. It still has the great potential to bridge theory and practice in university classrooms, and to reflect on perception, visual literacy, and media practice.

The learning objectives were multi-layered, too. Apart from an introduction into the history and theory of photography, the focus laid on visual literacy. The applied methods were inspired by cultural studies (cf. LISTER/WELLS 2001). The students should be able to closely read photographic images and to interpret them. They should improve their ability to translate photographs into verbal expressions—for example to describe their close-reading experience, and to write an exhibition review as if it would be published in a newspaper or an art magazine. Here the objective was to transform their theoretical knowledge and their visual impressions into texts that were directed to different audiences and therefore must use specific textual forms. As part of the artistic and practical tutorials, the students developed visual art inspired by *The Family of Man*. In a written essay, they reflected on their work with visuals. The students also learned to search and evaluate findings in image banks with »respect to copyright and ethical standards« (KEDRA 2016: 27).

5. Detailed Activity Description

I provided a reader with articles for each seminar session. The reader included articles from Edward Steichen from 1958 and 1960 (STEICHEN 1960) in which he reflected on his approach to photography as a »Witness and Recorder of Humanity« (1958: 159). Other journal articles referred to contemporary reactions towards *The Family of Man*, for instance in Moscow (1959–1960). Allan Sekula's article on the *Traffic in Photographs* (1981) provided a critical approach.

Learning objectives from my seminar, the tutorial and the excursion included the following aspects:

- a. Close Reading of Images and Ability of Identifying Content, Genres, Sources;
- b. Research and Fact Checking of Information and Sources;
- c. Understanding the Production Process from Picture Taking to Curating and Exhibiting;

- d. Oral and Written Reflections on Images and Visual Storytelling as Group Work and Individual Work;
- e. Own Creation of Photographic Work Based on *The Family of Man*.

a. Close Reading of Images and Ability of Identifying Content, Genres, Sources

During the first session, the students had to choose one picture from *The Family of Man* that seemed to be interesting enough for them to think about and with it throughout the entire semester. I provided print-outs of *The Family of Man*-images from the catalogue for this 'guardianship for one photograph'. No further information was given, such as photographer, date, place, names of those who were portrayed and the circumstances they were in, nor their relation to the photographer. The task for the students was to reflect closely on what they perceived in the image, such as a description of the situation, perspective of the photographer, feelings of the portrayed person, and their own feelings as a recipient. It was important that the first encounter with the photo was a print out: the materiality eases the focus on the image instead of clicking as soon as possible to the next site, as it happens online.

b. Research and Fact Checking of Information and Sources

To improve visual literacy through searching and evaluating information of the given visual material, I introduced the students to data bases and image banks, both public and commercial, among others the Library of Congress, Flickr, Getty Images, and Magnum Photos. We discussed copyright issues and the importance of reliable sources, but also the importance of photo credits—not only for photos in exhibitions and catalogues, but also for using visual material in seminar papers, thesis, and presentations. The students traced their guardianship-picture in *The Family of Man* catalogue: the caption mentions the name of the photographer, plus—if available—the name of the organisation s/he worked for. With these snippets, the students started to research the biography of the respective photographer, the history of the photo agencies s/he worked for, and—if possible—more detailed information about the single image they were attracted to. The students improved their sensitivity in understanding single images and contextualized images like in the catalogue.

c. Understanding the Production Process—From Picture Taking to Curating and Exhibiting

Critical viewing as part of visual literacy (cf. AVGERINO 2011) comes with knowledge about the production process, from picture taking to curating and exhibiting. The photographer's biography and her/his affiliation opened insights to different working conditions of photographers. Since many of *The Family of Man*-contributors worked with photo agencies such as Magnum

Photos, we reflected on humanistic approaches towards photography such as Magnum's human concerned photography. In a second step we discussed contemporary photo-journalistic approaches and topics to compare picture languages, possibilities of access to stories, and of digital media-storytelling. Based on information about Edward Steichen and the following critical academic discourse towards the exhibition, we focused on the relationship between creator and curator, the status of the image in the exhibition, and the status of single images within a series of images. We compared the visual storytelling in the catalogue with the exhibition space, and in new media, such as the iPad-guide offered by the CNA. These comparisons enable engagement with visual literacy skills such as visual association, constructing meaning and re-constructing meaning.

d. Oral and Written Reflections on Images and Visual Storytelling as Group Work and Individual Work

To promote the knowledge of visual vocabulary and definitions, the students reflected on images and visual storytelling as group work and individual work. To prepare for the excursion to *The Family of Man* in Luxemburg, the students developed research questions to confront the curators, photo restorers, and leading managers from the Centre National de l'Audiovisuel. We discussed contemporary challenges in the conservation of original photographs with the staff in the CNA-headquarter in Dudelange and in Clervaux castle where *The Family of Man* is exhibited; including Jean Back who re-discovered *The Family of Man*, and Anke Reitz who oversees *The Family of Man* since 2005. The guardianship for one specific photograph helped the students to understand photography both as an object of research, and a research method. How did the students read the image at first sight? How did they perceive the image with new information, for instance when they learned details about the photographer and the production process of this specific image, and its status within the exhibition? What made the difference for themselves in their visual literacy, comparing their approach at the first session to the last one, as reflected in a written assignment at the end of the course? Based on this field work, the students reflected on *The Family of Man* in seminar papers, and combined theory from the existing literature with their own findings and impressions in Luxemburg.

e. Own Creation of Photographic Work Based on *The Family of Man*

To complete the practical tutorial, some students developed their own practical photographic project, including a written reflection in case they wanted to be graded. The variety of ideas and reflections was amazing. One student worked intensely with the guestbooks and visitors' comment on *The Family of Man*. He was aware of the comments from the 1950s' exhibition. In Clervaux castle, he photographed the guestbook that—in 2015—was created through post-its. He

photographed the post-its and juxtaposed the contemporary comments with original pictures to reflect on the polyvalence of image and text through de-contextualization and recontextualization.

One student presented an alternative family album, referring to *The Family of Man's* catalogue. She tinkered a small paper box, filled with images she took over years from her parents, her grandparents, her sister and herself. All images were in colour, and I as the viewer had to engage with them physically: I could follow the order my student had arranged the pictures in—or I could make up a new sequence. In her accompanying text, she reflected autoethnographically and very personally about her growing-up, her status within her nuclear family and her relationships to each of the relatives she had photographed.

A group of female students set out to photograph *The Family of Students*. They wanted to get to know students from other fields and from neighbouring universities. They aimed to compare their daily lives. This project brought to light that the students had difficulties to approach others in person. They mostly tried to reach out to others online, which was time-consuming. The learning outcome was that even if photographs seem so light-hearted, gaining access to the lives of others as a photographer sometimes is the hardest part of the work.

6. Concluding Remarks

I tailored the course specifically for the theory-practice-approach of the Cultural Studies and Aesthetic Communication-department at Hildesheim University. The combination of seminar, artistic tutorial and excursion opens holistic and diverse possibilities to engage with images and to improve visual literacy. The limitations lay in time and space: not all universities support excursions (also financially), and travels from overseas to Luxemburg are time-consuming and expensive. However, *The Family of Man* still can be used to teach visual literacy without the excursion. One excellent example is the guardianship for one photo, as shown previously.

In 2013 and 2015, I had to build the reading list mainly with historical material, such as Roland Barthes' famous essay about *The Great Family of Man* (BARTHES 1972). In a sense, this limited the scholarly theoretical approaches. In more recent years, scholars re-view *The Family of Man* for its humanistic intentions (cf. SANDEEN 1995; GUITTARD 2006; TURNER 2012; RUNGE 2016; FERRETTI-THEILIG/KRAUTZ 2017; HURM 2018; HURM/REITZ/ZAMIR 2018). The recently rediscovered Max Horkheimer's opening speech of the exhibition in Frankfurt in 1958 shows an empathetic approach to *The Family of Man*, with focus on the potential of viewer's identification with people through photographs (cf. HORKHEIMER 2018; JAY 2018). The academic interest shifts from hyper-critic to considerations of the positive sides of the world-known exhibition, and in re-writing and re-

shaping so-far fixed opinion of *The Family of Man* (cf. AZOULAY 2013; RUNGE 2012). These materials open new possibilities of teaching with a starker emphasis on *The Family of Man's* humanistic approach.

Potential Applications in Other Fields of Study

Teaching *The Family of Man* can be applied in other fields of study, for instance American Cultural Studies since its making, exhibition design and purpose is closely connected to the history of the United States after World War II and the growing understanding of photography as art and popular culture. Also, in Political Science *The Family of Man* can serve teaching purposes, for example in the more recently growing field of Global Visual Politics that fosters the use of images in analyzing international relations. In Gender Studies and Journalism studies *The Family of Man* can improve visual literacy by discussing the underrepresentation of female photographers in the journalistic field and the possibility of a female gaze (Laura Mulvey). Recent publications by female scholars of photo theory—such as *The Civil Contract of Photography* by Ariella Azoulay (2008), or *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* by Susie Linfield (2010), should complement more classical readings by Judith Butler and Susan Sontag (cf. RUNGE 2019).

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