Pictures and us – copying and reshaping life –

… I remember looking at life as a series of endless and exciting freeze frames - Douglas Kirkland

_____

Whenever I talked to my mother about photographs, she always mentioned her days they had to flee from Silesia to Upper Franconia. It was a cold spring in 1945, the last months of World War II. Among her few belongings that fit in a basket of sheets, a suitcase and a bag, there were also albums with family photos. She never forgot to tell me: everything in life can be replaced, except for photos. At the time, I couldn't

understand the meaning she gave to photos of *her life* and memories. Today, 60 years later, when I see the photos of *my life* so far in these days of corona isolation and retreat, I remember it. However, instead of being kept in family albums, my *"memories"* are now *"piling up"*, digitized in the computer. Almost 40,000 pictures, redundantly backed up thrice or stored indestructibly in the cloud for all eternity - the world would have to end for their loss.

But what does this mean today, around 60 years later, for the value of photographs? What should they remind of? What is their meaning, their uniqueness? And where does our insatiable impulse come from, that led to these huge mountains of photos?

The desire for photo and the remake in the *"post"*

The number of pictures taken every day, whether as *"still"* or *"moving",* and the millions that then become stock media in the databases of Adobe, Getty Images, on YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, is now beyond our imagination. Instagram alone has forty billion photos, and its users share an additional 80 million photos per day on average. Ascending trend.

This flood of pictures is not above us. It is us who set this flood in motion, we produce it. Driven by the pleasure in the image, by ourselves, an event, a happy moment, a journey, the desire to remember. Our greed became so insatiable that we now judge the new smartphones first by their camera functions. And it is only logical that Apple is promoting the latest iPhone with its 3 different lenses on the back of the phone. It cannot be about truth, objectivity and reality. Because, as image producers and consumers, we actually know: when we take photos, we stand, pose and adjust. We direct the *"objects"* to be photographed - with varying degrees of skill. And after taking the photos, we start retouching: we smooth, trim with digital filters, colors, brushes or delete the recordings if we don't like them in order to repeat. The selfie shooting is followed immediately by the collective assessment of the image results. The image is zoomed into, in order to then decide whether deleting or repeating is

necessary. And we, the older ones, remember the hectic curiosity that seized people when black and white prints were passed around. Everyone wanted to see them, comment on them, check themselves in the mirror of pictures.

Professional picture producers, whether art and commercial, or news photographers, may laugh at that. But they do it themselves, more discreetly and sophisticatedly - either when planning a shoot or later in the *post* on PC. Because no one, whether professional or amateur, is satisfied with the simple depiction of reality. As farsighted and clever *Susan Sonntag* already noted back in 2003, "*one of the tasks of photography is to beautify the ordinary appearance of things*" (S. Sontag, Das Leiden der Anderen betrachten / Regarding the Pain of Others/, p.94)

Progress – what is happening with us?

The rapid technical development of photography has also changed us. We live in symbiosis with the functional phone and its camera. We photograph as much as we google, make phone calls, e-mail, chat and tweet. And we do it almost automatically as if we couldn't existent without our virtual image.
How much thereafter the public social choreography has changed, the today over 80-year-old American street photographer *Joel Meyerowitz* ascertained in a conversation:
„So the street had a kind of physical, visual dynamic. [But now] what you see on the street, in effect, are all these phones. On every photograph there's going to be a dozen phones showing up. So the pictures are subverted. Suddenly it looks like you're not just making a picture of your time, but you're making a commentary on the use of phones. And so that adds a familiarity to every single picture, and it derails certain emotional momentary observations that might be the heart of the picture because now you see eleven phones" (Ready for Surprise: Interview 2020 Jim Casper)

He misses the interaction between people on his photographs. What dominates is the isolating gaze down on the display of their devices, the aversion of shared public space.
Like the social, our individual and physical attitude with readily available apparatus has become a different one. When we take pictures, we keep the display in front of our eyes with outstretched arms. We make ourselves big - and are thus almost conspicuously the center of the action, just like at the start of photography.

Together with the change of attitude, our perceptual culture has changed. Everybody witnessed it: A concert begins, an artist appears. This is the moment in which amidst our attention as a listener, spectators and the "performance" take the stage. Our senses and gazes are glued to the screen, they are framed through our devices. Often, these moments are reproduced in which many people integrate themselves into the event as selfies, then examine the result and send them online to their social media channels. From a real, analogue process we make a virtual, digital one. The concert, the event becomes a set of one's own performance online, a place for our appetite for hedonism.

"Our depressing feeling of the volatility of all things has only strengthened since the camera gave the opportunity to save the volatile moment. ..., we consume pictures with growing speed, and ... pictures consume the actuality." (*Sontag,* p. 171).

So many pictures – what we are looking for in them

What is behind this pleasurable, medial reproduction of our world, the *"recycling of reality"* (Susan Sonntag), which spares no effort or expense. Where does the sheer insatiable hunger for images that fill the memory of our devices come from, that lead to the sale of additional digital storage space in the cloud becoming huge business?

We are surrounded by tons of images that occupy the public space with ever larger displays. According to Susan Sontag, the reason for this lies *"…in the logic of consumption itself. Consumption means burning up, consuming - and at the same time includes striving for supplementation. By taking pictures and consuming them, we provoke the need for more and more pictures"* (Sontag, Über Fotografie/On Photography, p. 171). For her, the overproduction of images is the necessary counterpart to the capitalistically driven excess production of goods.

Even if photography is embedded in it, - I do not want to distinguish between professional photography and that of amateurs - and constantly encourages the consumption of picture as a commodity like all other goods, I presume an autonomous, anthropological motivation, which is represented by the eternal desire to depict.

Perhaps we have always needed figures, drawings and depictions – today, that's photos - to survive: To reflect and remember, to understand and make societal bonds to ensure our existence. That's why, in order to understand the reality, we build models and stage pictures for the theater. We have the stonemason for the monument or the sarcophagus, we have the painter or, today, the photographer. Archaeological museums are essentially picture collections that lead us to the earliest known human history with their exhibits. We are amazed by the first cave drawings and human figures, by faces, gigantic mosaic pictures, reliefs, erotic and sexual depictions. If the photograph *"is a method of capturing an unpredictable and exclusive reality"* as Susan Sunday says (p. 156), this is certainly the case for illustrations of all kinds that accompany the entire human history: We want to understand, we want to see what's behind the visible of that what we suspect, as if it's hiding another, more significant truth before us (See the Sufi concept of the Alevites of *batini* and *zahiri,* meaning the hidden and the obvious respectively). We want to stop it so we can examine it over and over again. Do we perhaps do it because we know that *"the future will erase the present"* (Louise Glück, Proofs & Theories, Essays on Poetry, 1994)?!

To understand, furthermore, the more important necessity in pictures comes into play: the search for stimulants. The numbers alone of the consumption of erotic or pornographic images, moving and still, measured in internet clicks, time and money, prove: In addition to understanding, people also need pictures for their emotional budget.

As seen today, the need for the picture is not new, but the overproduction, the tide and the overstimulation are. The growing number of pictures, their technical sizes in the projection or presentation, whether three- or two-dimensional, whether luminous and flashing, show us: a delimitation is in progress; a doubling, tripling of our reality and dreams, which potentiates itself in a breathtaking manner.

Traces of life – Discovery

In Wim Wenders film *„Don't come knocking"* (2005), the daughter Sky tells her father when she encounters him for the first time; *"I know every picture of you, the old photos. I have looked at them over and over again. I traced the contours of your face with my fingers...".*
From photographs a peculiar charm is shown, as if we could immerse ourselves through their viewing, like a time traveller into the past who could touch the protagonists. Although they contain as expired moments, as freeze frames, traces of life that lead the viewer beyond the prelude and the aftermath of the photographed moment, they still remain as merely an image of reality. We cannot touch them, we can only discover and read patiently.

Another example from film history:
In *Michelangelo Antonioni's* marvelous film *"Blow up"* (1966), a London based fashion photographer David Hemmings is the center of attention. Bored of the studio shots with models and pursued by groupies, he begins to look for new meaning in street photography. As he is photographing a man and a woman in a park, he happens to witness a murder. After this disturbing event,- while developing the photo back in his studio - upon zooming in, he stops on the horrified gaze of the woman (Vanessa Redgrave). Thereafter, through further zoom-ins, he follows her gaze to a bush, where he can then see a hand holding a pistol. As he's developing the latest photos, on which the woman can be seen alone, he discovers the outlines of a body in the bushes. To make sure, he goes to this bush and confirms his suspicion: he finds the dead body of the man that the woman was seen with earlier. Even if the film ends in a surrealistic way - on another visit to the park, the body had disappeared, a group of circus performers play tennis without any balls next to the park - Antonioni shows us the power of the gaze, the concentrated vision.

With another example I wish to remind you of the famous iconographic photograph, *"Raising a Flag over the Reichstag, May 2, 1945*" by Yevgeny Khaldei. It shows two Red Army soldiers on the Reichstag building, hoisting a Soviet flag. Although the photo was staged, the original reveals a piece of unpleasant truth that counteracts the political cliché of the innocent Red Army, as there are two wristwatches on the arm of the soldier holding the flag. A detail that points to the reality of pillaging and looting by Soviet soldiers during the conquest of Berlin. In addition to the dramatization of the photo through the inclusion clouds of smoke etc., one of the clocks was also removed. Not a great feat even then.

Many of us photographers have certainly made similar but different discoveries in pictures like I have. We found traces of life in pictures, which disturbed an idyll or the mirage. I had collected photographs of the history of an Upper Franconian village for

an exhibition. Many rural idylls could be seen in them. But, also, the difficult life: Women with goiter (malnourishment, stemming from Iodine deficiency), small dark houses, heavy agricultural work. Then, something extraordinary happened, which disturbed this idyll. While enlarging one of the images - there was an inn with a sapling in front of it -, I was able to make out an iron swastika on the fence around the sapling. That made it clear that this was *a Hitler lime,* planted in front of the village inn. I have not been able to trace by whom it was planted. Yet the photo became a document of a village's history, it shows us opposing but complementary perspectives.

Illusions - deceptive images

The situation is different with images that are, openly or covertly, are not what they claim to be. Those that try to grab our attention with their message – be it for advertising, politics or art photography. I call them deceptive pictures. The easiest way to do this is through the *"symbolic picture"* that is used more and more frequently in print- and online media. Since, according to the official definition, it is a depiction that does not represent concrete facts (according to Wikipedia) i.e., it does not show the process that is being described, it is already by definition a deception and untrue. What should be discussed here are the medial ethics and morals, the intention and effect of this media practice.

It becomes a bit more difficult when the picture fakes authenticity, such as when it promotes a mayoral candidate, a pale young politician who is *"sold"* as a doer, as a hands-on man of the people. The attributes that he is represented with on the posters: a raised coat collar, surrounded by questioning, sympathetic citizens, clearly ready to answer questions.

It becomes even more difficult when authenticity and depth are claimed with dogmatically exaggerated black and white photography. As if the method, namely the renunciation of color, is the key to understanding a hidden reality. We often encounter these types of pictures in *"street photography"*. When their photographers are not capturing the comedy or tragedy of everyday life in a humorous way, they often focus on structures of light and shadow, on people who move within them (An exception here is perhaps the b/w work by *Allan Schaller*, who developed it to perfection). Many of them have a voyeuristic trait, a lack of interest in the location of the action, in the identity of those portrayed. On Instagram, we notice: The dramatization of the picture's message is attempted with extreme vignetting, with titles or quotes from poetry.

It is similar with images that try to reanimate an atmosphere. The staged Paris photo by *Robert Doisneau* - a couple kissing, *"Le Baiser de l'Hôtel de Ville Paris"* (1950), which is often misunderstood as factual - is repeated today - whether in Paris, Rome or Prague -, inevitably *"wrong".* At best, it satisfies nostalgic longings or the fashionable retro look.

Further examples can be found in the b/w photographs from the jazz milieu. Here, too, the style and motifs of the 50s and 60s are repeated, as we know them from the

Blue Note record covers (see also *William Claxton Jazz seen*). However, the milieu of musicians, clubs and the night is different today.
Both times, the evoked moods are deceptive, as they provide depth and meaning which, however, does not exist in the first place.

But as always, there is an artistic counterpoint, playing with the truth and appearance, as exemplified by the Canadian photographer *Jeff Wall*. His seemingly documentary images are staged within days of work, arranged with actors and props in order to record a message that can only be deciphered by observation and attentiveness. One of his best-known pictures, *"Mimic"* (1982), shows a street in Vancouver with three people meeting each other on a sidewalk. An apparent banality if the photo did not also contain a representation of hidden discrimination, of racism. Because the gesture of the *"white"* man - he pulls up his right eyebrow with his finger - is a racist allusion to the oncoming passer-by with Asian features.

Narratives – Truths and "Storytelling"

In order to give pictures authenticity and vitality, photography is now often linked with the concept of "*storytelling".* This originates from the world of goods and sales. Life is breathed into things through a *"narrative".* Because, according to calculations of market strategists: the XY perfume, the designer chair, the fashion dress etc. sell better if their image consists of a story. Emotions, dramaturgy attracts attention and creates bonds. The irrelevant and the arbitrary gain importance.

Applied to photography, this means that in contrast to film, there is only one frame available to establish the message, the story. This has consequences for the composition, the colors, and the content. The viewer should set the picture in motion, feel its story, its situation, its people. Photographs that subscribe to this concept are often cryptic, enigmatic, as if a story had already started with their alleged secret. This often corresponds to a lack of attention to the context of the picture, a lack of patience and immersion.

We see this when we look at the pictures by *Vivian Maier* (1926 - 2009), taken long before this storytelling hype. She didn't want to be seen as a photographer, just follow her infinite curiosity. The same thing can be experienced by looking at the photos of *Robert Frank* from his American series *"The Americans".* The story in the pictures and its emotional *"impact"* does not come from calculation, the enigma. It comes from *Robert Frank's* deep immersion into the everyday American life. His photos succeed in coagulating moments into iconographic images. And *each* one opens a window into a world full of stories.

The picture - Its soul and the "Light Shadow"

As I was taking pictures outside of a cafe on the streets of a Turkish town, a young man came up to me and asked: *Hangi ruh ile çekiyorsun? - with what soul, what feeling are you photographing?* The question surprised me very much, it was unusual - and beautiful. Because curiosity usually comes like this: with which camera model and for whom are you *photographing*? But here it was about the inner motif, one that

gives the picture its soul. Yes, some pictures have a soul.

I encountered this question about the soul of a picture, its vitality, again while reading *Roland Barthes*. Looking at the photo of his beloved deceased mother, he speaks of *"expression"* as an utterance of truth. *"And if a photo fails to show this utterance, then the body remains shadowless…. and if he (the photographer, note JM) does not understand it, be it because of a lack of talent, be it through unfortunate circumstances, to give the transparent soul its bright shadow, the subject remains dead forever.* "(R. Barthes, Die helle Kammer/ La chamber Claire, P. 121.)

Robert Frank, who traveled through America with his *"little camera"* (Jack Kerouac), found precisely these *"shadows of the transparent soul"* and shaped them into a stirring poem. *„He sucked a sad poem right out of America on to film, taking rank among the tragic poets of the world"* (Jack Kerouac, Introduction the Americans) That's how the miracle happens where from the universe of the world of pictures, some of them begin to speak while being examined and trigger deep emotions.

But in the flood of pictures and their processing, we experience today that *"... society is anxious to bring photography to its senses, to tame the madness that constantly threatens to blow up in the face of the beholder."* (P.130) And the more we subject the growing flood of images, their madness and ambiguities to *"the civilized code"* and make perfect illusions out of them, the *"representation over what is represented"* begins to triumph. (Adorno, Minima Moralia)

The Picture - Memory and "The Authentication of Presence"

When my grandmother felt that she was near death, she asked my mother to go and see the family photo album with her. It was exactly the night before she died. I did not find out what they were talking about, nor did I ask about it. Despite her being in our

apartment, my mother didn't want me to accompany her dying. Today I think about it and ask myself: did she look at the photo in which, after my birth, I was at my first home, the refugee apartment? Or was it the photo that shows her with her three grandchildren. Perhaps she took the picture in hand with her husband, with whom she loved to hike up the Śnieżka (Schneekoppe), and whose life came to an end without her being by his side. Or did she even pause at the picture that shows her at the train station, with my sister and my mother together with companions and some belongings that they could take with them while fleeing from Silesia?

The photo albums that she was leafing through with her daughter must also have been in that baggage. What may her comments have been on the photographs? How did she feel while looking at the documents of a long and arduous rural life in Silesia,

the fleeing and the attempt at a new beginning after the war? I suspect it was in those last moments that the pictures began to speak, to show their souls. They became *"an authentication of presence"* (R. Barthes, p. 97), that one wants to assure oneself during these hours. Was this all true, really?

Jochen Menzel

Fürth, October 2020

Addendum:

The pictures on Instagram -
A Victory of *"Representation Over What is Represented"*?

Around 80 million images are uploaded to Instagram every day and presented to an almost unlimited audience for review. An astonishing development: Instagram has become a publication medium, a platform, that ignores the often arbitrary demarcation between professionals, artists and hobby photographers. In addition to Worldpress winners (John Stanmeyer etc.), renowned street photographers (John Meyrowitz), the Magnum photographers etc., everyone who takes pictures flock here - side by side and without fear of contact on a shared timeline in an endless stream of images. Is it a democratic ideal? Instagram as a medium of freedom that works almost without censorship? What would Susan Sontag or Roland Barthes have said about this development?

But what is striking about this flood of images is that with the exponential growth of *"content",* the meaning of content and context seems to evaporate in inverse proportion. The photographer refrains from asking the people photographed about their names and circumstances, or reporting on their encounters. The volatile content is linked to the volatile act of photography. In place of descriptions of the emergence of the image, cryptic hashtags are used that outline contexts and intentions.

By renouncing context, the depicted and the surrounding area become a tool for the photographer's ego, which obviously get by without content. We construct sets according to our ideas and turn people into dummies of our visions. Perhaps that was what *Adorno* meant when he spoke of the victory of *"representation over what is represented".* (Theodor W. Adornos, 1951/Minima Moralia)

But with the flood of images, the need for *"image silence"* grows, to stop the stream of images. People begin to defend themselves against the power of definition that is inherent in the flood of images. And unmistakably, people do not give up the wish to understand the world and the people in it.

Übersetzungen ins Englische: Han Hergüner

_____