

HOW 'TRUE' ARE PHOTOGRAPHS AND THE LIMITS OF PERCEPTION. TEN YEARS AFTER – GROUND ZERO REVISITED

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I don't trust words. I trust pictures.

(Gilles Peress)¹

Ein Bild ist ein Riß im Sein.

(Gernot Boehme).²

Photography is my way of understanding the world.

(Salman Rushdie)³

Abstract

The three quotes represent significant approaches to the following aspects which will be central for this essay: 1. the relationship between words and pictures; 2. the temporal significance of photographs; and 3. the relationships between photographs and the world outside. In my discussion of these three aspects I will concentrate in the first part on the event which happened on September 11, 2001 in New York, which was banned on many photographs, became a media-event and definitely changed the world. The second part will deal with Salman Rushdie's novel *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* and the interrelationship of medial representation. In the novel Rushdie explicitly deals with limits of perception, with experiences of limits and the phenomenon of transgressing boundaries. For Rushdie photography is the medium *par excellence* to bring these liminal processes in the readers' focus. Interpreting both paradigms and commenting on them from a cultural critical point of view I want to ask what role images play at all in our contemporary world and how we read them.

Keywords: *Pictures, Words, Rushdie*

I "I DON'T TRUST WORDS. I TRUST PICTURES."

The pictures of the exploding towers and the terrified Americans covered with white dust all over their bodies, the burnt skeletons of the construction material looming large towards the dark sky, the streets around the towers covered with rubble of stone, glass, metal, - these pictures created a global, transnational pictorial consciousness in which everyone - whether in India, Pakistan, Tschetschenien, Europe and the

United States of America - could participate on call. No matter what country, no matter what availability of TV channels, all over the world the same photographs were broadcasted, shot by the most professional photographers in the US, who transformed their own dismay and chock without hesitation into the attitude of an observer in order to be able to witness and then document what they saw. Sensationalism matched with empathy, malicious joy with horror. The terror attack, titled by the German Weekly *Der Spiegel* "The War of the 21st century", was perfectly staged. Joan Deppa said: "They staged it like a TV-Show. It should happen in front of our eyes."⁴ The German film historian Georg Seesslen argues in his article "The direful image" that despite the horror it just was the continuous and stereotypical repetition of the same photographs over and over again which made the pictures 'reality'. However, in the never ending process of repetition the pictures as well as their motif lost their dignity and reality.⁵ This is a very valuable observation which we can retrace; the human tragedy in the actual event dissipated itself through repetition.

Moreover the pictures showing the burning Towers and Ground Zero seemed to be well known to the TV-spectators on the morning of September 11, 2001 - from American movies such as *Independence Day* or *Matrix*.

Still under the impression of the catastrophe

the philosopher Slavoj Žižek tries to describe his experience of monstrosity in an article in DIE ZEIT. As his title he chooses a quote from the film *Matrix*: “Welcome in the desert of the Real.”⁶ Žižek locates the “unthinkable which happened” in the cultural imaginary as it emerges in the films mentioned above. To a certain extent, so Žižek, America had to meet itself in his own fantasies. Witnessing Ground Zero was the leap from the symbolic death to the real death at the very same place the was destroyed in so many American films. As soon as the image of New York in ashes was staged by America itself, the “leave from history” – as Žižek calls it – has come to an end and terror dictates the political everyday life.⁷ In the same article Žižek raises the issue of the ideological navigation of the gaze. According to him the public perspective was that of the “innocent gaze”; the connotation here is the gaze which has to confront the “unutterable evil breaking in from outside.” This gaze is a critical reminder of Hegel’s suggestion that “evil is also in the innocent gaze of the beholder as he or she perceives nothing but evil.” (DIE ZEIT Nr. 39)

One of the MAGNUM photographers, Thomas Hoepker, comments on the photographs reproduced in the MAGNUM volume and admits that he strongly believes in documentary photography, “in taking pictures of real life.” However, when he looked at the pictures from the MAGNUM photographers he realised that there “were some that were wonderful or clever compositions, but they emphasized the artistry in photography rather than telling the story.”⁸ All of the MAGNUM photographers in one way or other express the same feeling, that they immediately questioned the relationship between aesthetics and ethics in the moment they focused the camera to the sight. “I even thought, It’s probably not right to go and take pictures. It’s so horrific, it’s not decent to photograph that.” But then the professional curiosity sets in and he admits “Of course then you begin to think professionally. You have to do something. You simply have to go out and take pictures.” (Ibid.)



New York September 11 by Magnum Photographers, p. 46-47.

Gilles Peres titled his series of photographs in the MAGNUM volume with the statement “I don’t trust words. I trust pictures.” If this sentence is not just meant in a provocative way – what does Peres want to convey? Are words more ‘true’ than ‘pictures’ and if so, how are they more ‘true’ or more ‘serious’? Is a picture really more than thousand words, as the popular saying goes?

Peres’ photographs are silent pictures. They show human beings as they try to escape the rain of dust, paper, and rubble – and how the disastrous cloud catches up with them and becomes denser and denser. Peres’ humans do not scream, they do not rear against the threat which they do not even know. At the moment the pictures were shot no one knew exactly what happened and why it had happened. The people in Peres’ pictures are frightened yet they are not headless. There is no hustle as in other photographers’ take on the situation; here it is calmness which prevails. The images do not have titles, they do not need language. They *evoke* and *show* what Roland Barthes calls the *eidos* of photography: death. It is ‘death’ in the eyes of the people instead of ‘death’ as *sujet* of the photograph. The central message of photographs, so Barthes, is the assertion of something that *was there* and not the negation of something that *is no longer* there. “It is as if the gaze which governs the economy of vision



New York September 11 by Magnum Photographers, p. 54-55.

would be retained by something inside.”⁹ When confronted with a photograph according to Barthes our consciousness will not turn to the nostalgic path of memory but choose the path of knowledge: the essence of photography is the ratification of what it represents. Hence, every photograph is a testimony of a presence, yet a presence which is not Proustian, which does not want to recall what was forgotten; much rather it wants to reassure the viewer that what is to see really existed. A very similar idea is formulated by John Berger in *Another Way of Telling* when he writes that photographs might have a seemingly close relationship with images of memory as they *present* something that is *absent*. The temporal condition of those two modes of images, however, is totally different. “Whereas remembered images are the *residue* of continuous experience, a photograph isolates the appearances of a disconnected instant.”¹⁰ In another passage of his book Berger calls this the “double message of photographs”, on the one hand they actually record what is in front of the camera, and on the other hand there is a second level of meaning involved. This level emerges from the abyss which rips open between “the moment recorded and the moment of looking. A photograph stops the flow of time in which the event existed,” Berger comments.¹¹

II “IF IT’S NOT ON TV, IT HAS NOT HAPPENED”¹²

This sentence comes from another MAGNUM photographer, Thomas Hoepker, a German who originally went to New York for the journal *Der Stern* and has been living in the US ever since. With his quote Hoepker raises the ambivalence of the photographic gaze which tries to satisfy our need for documentation yet at the same time lures our (unacknowledged) tendency for voyeurism. His version of the events of the morning of September 11 is certainly to some extent congruent with our own. Hoepker remembers that a friend called him indicating that there was black smoke coming out of one of the World Trade Towers. He listens to his friend but cannot really believe the story. He turns on the TV and only then when he sees the pictures his friend’s narrative turns into the description of what really happened.

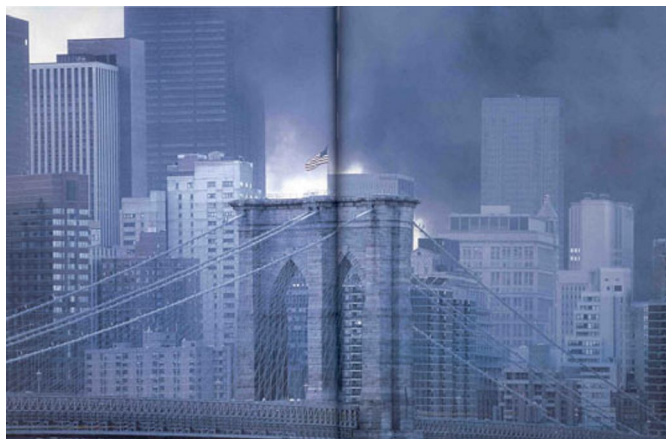
Different from Peress who - as we have seen - observes the people, their facial expressions and their body language - Hoepker concentrates his attention exclusively on the urban site, the city, the buildings, the atmosphere under the smoke-clouded sky.



New York September 11 by Magnum Photographers, p.70-71

What are these pictures from real life? To what extent are they a copy of the real? To what extent are they a document - not of external

reality but of the photographer's as well as the beholder's subjective gaze onto the real?



New York September 11 by Magnum Photographers, p. 72-73.

Hoepker's concern in his photographs is what he calls "visual integrity". Yet what does that mean? The compositional elements or the reduplication of what was in front of the camera as it presented itself to the human eye? Are Hoepker's urban sites 'after the fact' not aesthetic compositions playing with light and shadow, with fuzzy surfaces, with blurred contours technical constructions? The implicit claim here suggests that nothing was added, only registered. But the gaze is always incorporated in a subject and hence the way the outside world is perceived is necessarily influenced by the subject's conditions. "To bear witness" and "telling the story" are those functions of photography which guarantee visual integrity because they are supposed to underline the realistic mode of the photographic image. In the case of the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center this realism is necessary, so Hoepker, to make the brutality of the event fully understandable. Here reality is not to be *re-presented* but *presented*.

III THE MANIPULATIVE POWER OF IMAGES

Up to this point we have dealt with descriptions of photographers as they conceive of the principles of composition and how they

see the interplay of reality and medium. Not I want to turn to a philosophical argument, brought forward by Gernot Boehme in his book *Theory of the Image*. There Boehme argues that a picture is a rift, an abyss in being and that the human being feels this rift as a sudden realisation in his/her own existential condition.¹³ Other than Roland Barthes, who wanted to maintain the unique feature of the photographic image, Boehme wants to validate his reflections for all kinds of images. He applies the analyses of the reception of images, of their effects and of the phenomenology of perception to all iconographic representations. His metaphor of the 'rift' links with Berger's 'shock of discontinuity' and with Barthes' 'pure contingency'; for Boehme the challenging theoretical question is the difference between iconographic images and those mental images which are produced in our minds when we read literary texts. These would be the 'images of imagination'.

The three authors discussed here conceive of any encounter with pictures as a clash, a sudden rupture, a shock hence something at least disquieting if not frightening. If we follow the semantic field of these terms it is quite obvious that in this kind of encounter there are affects involved. This affective involvement in the reception process of pictures – in our case photographs – points to the fact that they are virtually predestined for manipulative communication. Moreover the discussion about the 'objectivity' or 'subjectivity' of photographs is somewhat antiquated. The technical means to manipulate a photograph have been developed to such an extent that it can no longer be used as a piece of evidence for instance. The theoretical debate about whether film and photography could be considered 'art' or whether the 'technical reproduction' of photography and film would thwart labelling film as art. Walter Benjamin's adversary in this matter was definitely Theodor W. Adorno who insisted that one of the most prominent characteristics of an artwork was its reception in contemplation of its 'aura.' Having an *aura* marks the artwork as a unique phenomenon but at the same time bars technically reproducible creations such as film

or photography from the realm of art.

Gernot Boehme approaches the question whether photographs represent reality or not from a different angle. He asks why we continue to receive photographs in newspapers or in television reports still as objective representations of truth although we know that they are intentionally organised to manipulate our judgement. Boehme calls this a "prejudice" signifying with this term that we receive the insinuated message in and of the pictures *before* we engage in an analyzing process of structure, meaning and intention. We see the pictures *as if* they were objective in order to satisfy our need for information and supply us with the feeling that we are up to date in the ways of the world.

Such a complex and clearly paradoxical prejudicial structure is deeply ingrained in our structure of attention and the ways we constitute meaning. According to Boehme it is exactly this structure which mass media take into consideration and with which they court the viewing figures and try to outsell each other.¹⁴

To resume these reflections: structure, message and context of use of a photograph – perhaps even of all pictures - are not only closely interlinked with expectations, attitudes and interests of the recipients but even heavily dependent on the viewer's' environmental conditioning and the cultural imprint.

IV "PHOTOGRAPHY IS MY WAY OF UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD"

A further variant of this dialectical relationship between fictional reality and realistic fiction can be found in a decidedly 'fictional' linguistic artwork, Salman Rushdie's novel *The ground beneath her feet*, published in 1999. The first person narrator in this novel is Rai, a photographer and modelled after the MAGNUM photographers whom we mentioned before. We could even go as far as to argue that Rushdie tries to access those theorems of the entangled relationship between reality and fiction which we discussed before by negotiating them in the fictional space of his novel. Although *The ground beneath her feet* could not be called

history of perception but it certainly is the attempt to write a history of the media, in particular of photography, in the mode of narrative fiction. The protagonist as photographer, the photographer as protagonist – the point is to show in many narrative variations that we can access whatever is called 'reality' only with and through mediatisation. Whether it is the death of the father, erotic moments between the lovers Vina Apsara and her lover Ormus Cama, or catastrophes such as disastrous earthquakes – the access to reality through the camera and the message are always aggressive. The whole narrative is epic in scope and is told by Rai, a photographer who works for the "Nebuchadnezzar Agency." A fictional photographic agency, of course; however, without doubt, a fictional analogy to the most famous non-fictional photo agency in the world, called Magnum in New York.

Rai is the one who not only takes photographs but also reflects upon theoretical implications of photography. He tells us that for a while it was his duty to take pictures of funerals. More often than not he "had to turn on [his] heels and run" because the mourners attacked him as "Murderer! Assassin!" And he could not deny that "there was a truth in the insults".

A photographer shoots. Like a gunman standing by a little gate in a prime minister's garden, like an assassin in a hotel lobby, he must line up a clear shot, he must try not to miss. He has a target, and there are crosshairs in his eyepiece. He wants light from his subjects, he takes their light and their darkness too, which is to say, their lives. Yet I also thought of these pictures, these forbidden images, as gestures of respect. The camera's respect has nothing to do with seriousness, sanctimony, privacy, or even taste. It has to do with attention. It has to do with clarity, of the actual, of the imagined.¹⁵

Rushdie plays with the oppositions of the seen and the unseen, the visible and the invisible, the solid and the shaky – like the ground beneath our feet. How do we know that it will hold once we step on it? "Five mysteries hold the keys to the unseen: the act of love, and the birth of a baby, and the contemplation of great art, and

being in the presence of death or disaster, and hearing the human voice lifted in song," Rushdie writes and goes on: "These are the occasions when the bolts of the universe fly open and we are given a glimpse of what is hidden...."¹⁶ The examples he gives for the "glimpses of the hidden" are liminal experiences which strike the human being with awe. A surprising death, the birth of a baby, natural catastrophes like earthquakes, or man-made disasters like the attack on the Towers of the World Trade Centre – all of these events prove to be frighteningly real and unreal at the same time.

Rushdie's novel was published two years before 9/11 – but in retrospect it carries the frightening intensity of the *paradox foreboding after the fact*.

The knowledge and realisation of what had happened and is still happening depends on the distribution of the news via the media. "In the West the earthquakes have stopped and the construction teams have moved in," Rai tells the reader. "Banks and insurance companies are building their new palaces over the faults, as if to assert the primacy of their authority, even over the misbehaving earth itself." In one of the sharply ironic culturally critical passages in the novel we learn that "the scars left by the quakes are being transformed into regeneration zones, gardens, office blocks, cineplexes, airports malls," and that people "have already started to forget and so, inevitably, resent those who remember."¹⁷ This is the story of the West which stands for industrialised countries and their negligence of predictable tragedy. The construction boom after the earthquake is Rushdie's image for the reluctance of people to remember, and their greed to rebuild their superficial world as quickly as possible without caring for glimpses into abysses below the surfaces of things. His critique on Western culture appears in various narrative forms in the novel, as direct reader address, as stream-of-consciousness, or self-reflexive comment. "'What's a 'culture?' Look it up. 'A group of micro-organisms grown in a nutrient substance under controlled conditions.' A squirm of germs on a glass slide is all, a laboratory experiment

calling itself a society.'" [95]

After catastrophes the West rebuilds, Rushdie writes. It rebuilds the laboratory of society and fills in the nutrient substance again. The glimpses into the abyss, to the hidden are no more possible – and no more desired. The scars on the surface have healed and we take up the programme of normality.

"In the South, however, the devastation continues," Rushdie writes.

It's as if the earth were discriminating against its most disadvantaged children. In India, where houses are built of mud and dreams, where the structures of life are fragile, their foundations weakened by corruption, poverty, fanaticism and neglect, the damage is immense. This is not pleasing to those who hold that India is not different from anywhere else, who deny that particularity of circumstance which makes a place itself. [554]

In Rushdie's novel there are many references to topical political and cultural events of the decade between 1980 and 1990, not only in America but worldwide. The scope of the narrative is vast; it begins with St. Valentine's Day 1989 – a year which changed the political structure of the world and it begins with a dream. "On St. Valentine's Day, 1989, the last day of her life, the legendary popular singer Vina Apsara woke sobbing from a dream of human sacrifice in which she had been intended victim." [3] Dreams have a special relationship to reality, in some way similar to photographs and narratives. As Freud taught us dreams carry over our emotional condition from the day into the mode of the dream consciousness. There the other tension of consciousness transforms the blocked strands of our waking state into images of the mind which unroll like a film sequence. Describing this process in this way is more than just an analogy or a metaphorical device. It harks back to the beginning of the essay where the relationship between photographs and reality or truth was discussed. In fact there are strong similarities between mental images and photography yet there are also significant differences which manifest themselves in the process of reception. Mental images cannot be

shared in the same way that we share photographs or narrative texts.

V TO SUM UP

Introducing memory as the mode of reconstructing what happened brings back the shaky relationship between photograph, narrative, and reality.

In *The ground beneath her feet* it is the photographer Rai who holds the narrative threads together, who is involved in the love story of the musician Ormu Cama and the singer Vina Apsara as the sometimes-lover of Vina. His narrative voice takes us from India to England to America as he slips into the role of the chronicler, the commentator and the judge of the ways of the world. In order to retrace Vina's life who - with her wild and irresistible voice - is caught up in a devastating earthquake, disappears into 'the ground beneath her feet' and is never seen again. Hence the novel is told in retrospect by Rai and thus representing Vina's life in the same mode than the one we discussed in our reading the photographs of the 9/11 attacks.

It is this bias, this undecidability between the desired, the real, the imagined and the unimaginable that forms the centre of attention for the MAGNUM photographers as it forms the narrative energy in Rushdie's novel. In both narratives *ruins and their meaning for human life* are the main topic: the ruins of the towers, the ruins

When we listen to the news it seems that the ground in America is shaking - ten years after 9/11.

"In teaching us a new visual code. Photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing. Finally, the most grandiose result of the photographic enterprise is to give us the sense that we can hold the whole world in our heads - as an anthology of images."¹⁸

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- 3 Salman Rushdie. *The Ground beneath Her Feet*. London: Jonathan Cape, 210.
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