

# Weimar Photography in Context Typology, Sequentiality, Narrativity

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The Weimar Republic (1919–1933) was a golden age of photography. Within just over a decade, Germany and its capital Berlin became a center of international modernism; photography, evolving in close dialogue with other art forms, was at the forefront of artistic innovation. Weimar photographers broke away from a pictorialist emulation of painting, challenging the very definition of (art) photography in the process. Technology was key in this process; as cameras became lighter, lenses faster, and film stock more light sensitive, this changed how, and by whom, photographs were produced and the ways and contexts in which they were viewed.

The rise of amateur photography was one notable development, buoyed up by publications such as Werner Gräff's *Es kommt der neue Fotograf!* (1929), an (anti-) instruction manual and rallying cry, telling photographers to emancipate themselves from the rules of 'correct' composition. This volume was published by the *Werkbund*; other leading institutions echoing the call for more artistic experimentation took part in this debate, most notably the *Bauhaus* and the associated movement of *Neues Sehen* (New Vision). The primary project was to change viewing habits; this was shared by the photographers of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity), though in contrast to the experimental, defamiliarizing images of *Neues Sehen*, their sharply focused documentary style remained indebted to an older tradition of realism, or 'Sachlichkeit'.

Not only did Weimar photographers draw on new technology, they also employed new recording strategies and new subject matters to radically redefine the conventions of art photography and the more general role of photography in society, its habits and conventions of viewing. One central feature of Weimar photography, which accounts for many of its innovative qualities, is its emphasis not on the individual image but on groups, clusters and sequences, often linked through explicit or implicit underlying narratives. Advances in printing technology meant that for the first in the history of pho-

tography, photographic images could be reproduced in high quality, in high print runs and at a reasonable price. The extraordinary career of the Weimar photobook, which became one of the main mechanisms for photographers to present their work, is the direct result of this development. The cinema, a medium whose narrative capacities by far outstripped the static photograph, became a crucial reference point for photographers, some of whom also worked in film. The illustrated magazine reflected this trend by featuring photo essays and other multiply illustrated articles. Taken together, these new formats enabled photographers to reach a much wider audience.

While existing research especially in an Anglo-American context centers on leading figures of Weimar photography such as László Moholy-Nagy, August Sander and Karl Blossfeldt, a more detailed exploration of Weimar photography ‘in context’ is still missing. Thus, the role of photography within a wider cultural landscape, its straddling of the divide between high and popular culture, and its profound impact on habits of seeing remain under-explored. Photobooks and photo-essays of the Weimar period presented images as part of typologies and sequences. Artists and intellectuals of the 1920s were obsessed with physiognomy and typology. Numerous photobooks—including August Sander’s well-known *Anlitz der Zeit* (1929) but also Erich Salomon’s *Berühmte Zeitgenossen in unbewachten Augenblicken* (1931), Erich Retzlaff’s *Das Antlitz des Alters* (1930) or Erna Lendvai-Dircksen’s *Das deutsche Volksgesicht* (1932)—present sequences of images that conceive of the human face through typologies of class, race, age, occupation, or political conviction—radically redefining the rules of photographic portraiture.

These innovations in photographic practice were catalyzed by the political and social crises of the Weimar Republic. A widespread sense of uncertainty after the lost World War led to attacks from left and right on the new German democracy. The ripples of these shockwaves can be traced in the photographic work produced in the 1920s and especially the early 30s, when the country, after a brief period of stability, was engulfed in the great depression. Throughout this period, the contested legacy of the War lingered on and affected photographic practices and debates. For many, the War experience had been defined by rapid advances in technology, including photography; World War One was the first war in relation to which the metaphor of the camera as weapon was developed consistently and across a broad range of writers.

Despite some common currents, however, Weimar photography was a far from unified field. Indeed, it can be described, with Daniel H. Magilow, as a ‘photography of crisis’: as a medium which enabled photographers to document, and reflect on, political rupture and social conflict; and as a field whose innovative character was in turn the product of existential uncertainty. The photographs of the War presented in photobooks by, for instance, Ernst

Friedrich, Ernst Jünger, or Kurt Tucholsky and John Heartfield represented a key link to this past, offering a means of representing and commemorating the War as well as querying its origins and its consequences. War photobooks also initiated a process of self-reflection about the present, about the shape, focus and identity of the newly founded German republic. The War, then, was a key reference point within Weimar culture, and photobooks as well as magazines ensured that the images taken during the War became accessible to the general public.

Yet documents from the past (however recent) are never self-evident and need to be contextualized—captioned, annotated or inserted into wider narratives. Such juxtapositions of images and texts in photobooks about the War can serve different purposes. Captions may reduce the openness and inherent ambiguity of the photographic image by pinpointing dates and locations; the embedding of wartime photographs in narratives of remembrance may endow anonymous images with emotional significance. To a certain extent, all textual framing strategies manipulate what an image means. In a stronger sense, textual framing can distort the photographic image, turning it into a medium of outright propaganda. The same range of options also applies to other discursive fields. In a country fast-forwarding into modernity, social and gender identities too became areas of contestation for which photobooks could serve as a site where contrasting models of identity were negotiated. But even seemingly a-political practices such as industrial and architectural photography turn to sequentiality in the Weimar years, often contextualizing images through the physiognomic metaphor of the face, as for instance in the photobooks of Albert Renger-Patzsch.

Underpinning photography both at the stage of recording and in the ways it is presented are various strategies of typology, sequentiality, and narrativity. By presenting photographic images arranged in sequences and typologies, the Weimar photobook lends itself to a narrative mode of reception that gives direction and coherence to the single image. This underlying narrativity, however, is usually implicit rather than explicit, as texts and images are juxtaposed or separated from each other, creating questions about the relationship between the two. Thus, the sequential arrangement of photographs does not necessarily result in a sense of continuity but can, on the contrary, produce rupture and contrast.

The articles in this special issue explore the consequences that typology, sequentiality, and narrativity have for our understanding of photography in the context of interwar media culture, of Weimar-era as well as present-day photography theory, and of word-and-image relations. Weimar culture lends itself particularly well to this enquiry, for during this period strategies of sequentialization and narrativization became crucial for how photographers conceived of their work and for the way their work was viewed by an audience, which went far beyond the educated middle classes. Indeed, one promi-

ment theme in photography theories and debates at the time was the need to make photography accessible to the masses by breaking down the barrier between professional and amateur photographers; another recurring issue was the pedagogical role of photography: its potential to change engrained habits and conventions of viewing, teaching viewers to look afresh at their everyday surroundings.

One of the master discourses of Weimar culture is physiognomy. The period saw the widespread revival of physiognomy, an eighteenth-century (pseudo-)science which deduces character traits from people's faces and general visual appearance. In the 1920s, this outmoded approach suddenly gained new currency and was expanded into an epistemological grand narrative. This is symptomatic of a profound sense of disorientation in a fragmented, anonymous and ever-changing society. Here photographs, particularly when they were arranged to allow for comparison and analysis, could provide a sense of orientation. Indeed, as WOLFGANG BRÜCKLE argues in his contribution, the reach and remit of physiognomy was expanded beyond the human face to include objects, buildings and even whole cities. As the discourse of physiognomy shows, Weimar photography was a domain where people and objects, the animate and the inanimate, were brought together, in sometimes startling or disorienting ways (the face of objects). In a narrower sense, physiognomy remained closely linked to the face. J. J. LONG shows how photo-books commemorating the War used portraits for their political agenda—whether from the pacifist left (Ernst Friedrich, Kurt Tucholsky and John Heartfield) or the nationalist right (Ernst Jünger and Friedrich Georg Jünger). Both sides exploit the emotive nature of images as part of their narratives about the War and its legacy in the present. SILKE HORSTKOTTE takes up the theme of War memory by considering the photographs of dead and dying horses in Ernst Jünger's *Das Antlitz des Weltkrieges*, which extend the notion of suffering to animals and underline the creaturely dimension of War-time trauma.

The legacy of the War loomed large in the photographic culture of the Weimar Republic, but even larger loomed the problems of the present. The middle years of relative stability, the so-called Golden Twenties, were framed by economic and political crises on either end, and the great depression of the late 1920s in particular hit the young German republic hard. Against this backdrop a new brand of photography emerged: a documentary, socially critical photography which engaged with those at the bottom of society. Such images were often cast in stark opposition to the superficial glamor of the culture industry. One photographer who was able to draw on his experience of both the film industry and celebrity photography was Helmar Lerski. As CAROLIN DUTTLINGER argues, even when Lerski turns his camera onto the urban poor, the 'unknown people' of Berlin, his style is not one of documentary realism but of dramatic expressiveness—of the face as infinitely variable.

By presenting each face as a series, he breaks down any stable link between sitter and image, between appearance and identity, and instead presents the viewer with a trans-individual atlas of human emotions. Compared to Lerski's expressively lit studio portraits, the images of the 'Arbeiterfotograf' Walter Ballhause have a sense of gritty realism. Ballhause recorded his images of people queueing at the unemployment office with a hidden camera, at a time when he was himself unemployed. WIM PEETERS reads these images as counterparts, or *Gegenbilder*, to a second discourse in Weimar photography: the iconography of the successful person, a fixed trope in magazines and self-help guides, where staged images using actors were held up to viewers as an aspirational ideal.

Illustrated magazines offered a more playful, (self-)ironic take on Weimar culture and its faith in the verisimilitude of the photographic image. DANIEL H. MAGILOW shows in his analysis of April fool jokes how these jokes, far from trivial, reflect and refract the obsessions of Weimar popular culture with such modern themes as mechanical movement, sensational spectacle, or miraculous weight loss. Often critiqued as manipulating their naïve readers, the magazines' use of fake photographs and the mixed message of their satirical sight gags astutely comment on the notion that "the camera does not lie". Their interweaving with serious photojournalism pieces complicates the arguments of critics that the *Illustrierten* were exclusively naïve purveyors of distraction.

The final two contributions to this special issue by BERND STIEGLER and MICHAEL JENNINGS address Weimar photography at its most self-reflexive, namely in its representations of technology in a modernizing society. Unlike in the context of the World War, where technology was primarily seen as destructive, these 'Technikfotografien' are notable for the way they embrace and celebrate technological innovation—in photography and within the world at large. Thus architecture is not seen through a physiognomic or anthropomorphizing lens but as an emblem of modernity and as a part of lived collective experience which deserves to be brought to our attention. This celebration of technology shows Weimar photography not as backwards- but as forward-facing, embracing the opportunities of the future in ways which linked Weimar photographers to an international context.

One aspect which emerges from all of these contributions is the enduring legacy of Weimar photography. This legacy is not limited to particular photographers, schools or genres, but extends to more general ways in which we view and use photography in our daily lives. In the present digital age, photographs are rarely seen in isolation. Despite the ubiquity of video footage, however, the still photograph continues to have a place in collective debates and in the way events are captured and understood. For the same reason, however, photographic sequences and narrative images are more prominent than ever; the recent upsurge in scholarly interest in the genre of the photo-

book is only one manifestation of this dimension. In this present climate, however, it is worth returning to the Weimar Republic as a period where such forms of photographic seriality, and the often contested narratives associated with them, first emerged. The Weimar Republic remains a relevant reference point for many of the current debates—about the mass media, individual and collective identity, memory and social inequality, to name but a few. An exploration of Weimar photography in its social, artistic and political contexts, and of the synergies between these images, is one of the most productive routes into this period.