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Photography as Illegitimate Art

Pierre Bourdieu and Photography

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Bourdieu placed his early ethnographic research in Algeria and Béarn retrospectively in a reciprocal relationship that is central to his way of dealing with photography.[1] In Algeria he studied the exodus of traditional society, and his interest and probably also his intuitive understanding of this process was due, not least of all, to the fact that this transformation also applied to social structures familiar to him from his home region of Béarn. Together with Abdelmalek Sayad, whom he had met at the university in Algiers, after his return from Algeria he pursued something like an inversion of the famous project of the "sad tropics", an inverse ethnography to "observe the effects that objectification of my native world would produce in me"[2]. He found the "sad peasants" of Béarn, whose cultural values were exposed to a process of devaluation due to the urban, modernized version of the neighboring class, the *classes moyennes*[3], increasingly defined by consumption. As a native anthropologist, Bourdieu put the camera aside and studied the consequences, with which the new technologies of image reproduction of the "modern times"

penetrated into the traditional world of Béarn, whereas he used photography in Algeria to document the dramatic transformation from a pre-capitalist mode of production toward a modernized, rationalized capitalist economy. It may be said that in this way Bourdieu lost the possibility of a naïve, unbroken way of dealing with photography because of what was demonstrated to him through a study on the social use of photography at the threshold of modernism in his own culture of origin: that in reality, the presumably objective replications of photographed reality had to subordinate themselves much more to the imperatives of social life than their immediate technical constitution would suggest. This is why an early essay by Bourdieu from 1965, "The Peasant and Photography"[4] (also the only article that he published with his wife Marie-Claire and which was partially included in the same year in *Un art moyen*[5]) is important if one wants to reconstruct the questions that Bourdieu pursued in his analysis of photography.

Why is it impossible for a peasant to use a camera, when the *classes moyennes* in his immediate small town environment use the apparatus so matter-of-factly, especially to document family rituals? It is not the case that photography does not occur in the peasant world: it was even imperative to photograph the major, non-everyday celebrations. For this, however, a professional photographer had to be hired, who gave instructions for arranging the picture to enable a specific group representation. A snapshot had to be prevented in every respect (e.g. dancing or eating together was not photographed); complete control over the arrangement was needed, so that individuals were ultimately not recognizable with their special features (which, among other things, is specifically sought in amateur photography today), but rather in their social roles. According to the Bourdieus it is quite obvious that the invention of photography is used in this social

context to play a specific role in the family unit; family ceremonies are recorded to solidify group solidarity. This is a classical theme from Emil Durkheim: "If one accepts, with Durkheim, that the function of festivals is to revivify the group, one understands why photography should be associated with them, since it provides the means of eternalizing and solemnizing these climatic moments of social life wherein the group reasserts its unity."[6] No one is interested here in the aesthetic and technical implications of photography itself; no one would think of depicting arbitrary social scenes, except precisely those who were socially predestined to be photographically reproduced. This is the sense of the mention of the "social use of photography", which led in the traditional world of the rural population of Béarn to a strengthening of social integration. Strengthening integration means, at the same time, delimiting one's own social membership from that of other social groups. "A frivolous luxury, the practice of photography would for a peasant be a ridiculous barbarism; to indulge in such a fantasy would be rather like a man taking a stroll along with his wife, on a summer evening, as the pensioners of the *bourg* do: 'That's fine for vacationers, those are things of the city. A peasant who would walk around with a camera hanging over his shoulder would be no more than a failed monsieur'[...]"[7]

Thus there is a strong orientation to the classical Durkheimian sociology in Bourdieu's early sociology of photography, which is also to be understood, like his empirical orientation, as a reaction to the "mass mediologists"[8], since Bourdieu was altogether opposed to the concept of mass culture, because in his view it embodied an anti-sociological way of thinking. Yet there are also theoretical innovations that go beyond this basis in Durkheim. In his autobiography *Equisse pour une auto-analyse* Bourdieu indicates the "very own style of his research"[9]: a comparatively

conventional empirical object, photography, provides him with an opportunity to discuss "essential issues especially of Kantian ethics"; a more trivial object of investigation leads him into the center of legitimate philosophical positioning. There is also another indication relating to the position of "un art moyen" for the development of the foundations of his theoretical orientation: the concept of disposition that is central to his work was first developed in the introduction to *Un art moyen*, hidden in a place where such findings must have the effect of a foreign body and may have prevented some readers from devoting further attention to the book. What Bourdieu argues for – not least of all against the structural laws of Lévi-Strauss and Sartre's existentialist free will – is a science that is able to relate the process of the internalization of objectivity as a class habitus and class ethos self-reflexively to the foundations of sociological thinking. The negotiation of objectivism and subjectivism in the social sciences – a project that Bourdieu untiringly pursued in his methodological positions – is formulated for the first time here in the introduction to *Un art moyen*. Hence we are now able to analyze the attitude of the peasant who finds using a camera absurd as a practice structured by his class habitus. The basic element of the peasant ethos is the directive to enlarge inherited property. This is the reason for this group's aversion to investing in consumer goods, even though the means are available. That technology costs money is not the point. Taking pictures is an urban luxury, it is the gesture of the parvenu; the apparatus functions as a symbol for progressive modernization based on innovation, and it is precisely this that is suspect in the logic of the class ethos of the peasant society. From this perspective it is also understandable why the peasant taking photographs not only makes a ridiculous figure, but unlike the petit bourgeois or tourist taking pictures, he is also a threat to social integration: his

photographing would have to be understood by his own reference group as a means of distancing himself from them.

It is not at all the case that Bourdieu left it at reducing the different social appropriations of photography to the determinant of habitual class expectations. In particular, Pierre and Marie-Claire Bourdieu emphasize a formal element of photographed objects: namely the principle of frontality[10]. Portrait photography or the elaborate stagings for wedding photos are predominated by the endeavor "to pose for the photograph as one would stand before a man whom one respects and from whom one expects respect, face on, one's forehead held high and one's head straight."[11] In a note he refers to the "man of honor" among the Kabyles as the one who shows his face, who looks into the face of his counterpart while uncovering his own.[12] In a society based primarily on honor and dignity, "in which one is constantly and inescapably exposed to the gazes of others"[13], a controlled physical representation indicating status must be produced under all circumstances. This is the reason for the rigid, soldierly pose, intended to provide a clearly readable image in every respect, as though a misunderstanding or confusion were to be expected if this extreme conventionality were to be neglected. Bourdieu speaks of a "reciprocal reverence" that photos emphasizing frontality in this way are intended to effect. The theme of frontality is a further variation on the theme of tradition and modernity that is typical of Bourdieu's early writing. Frontality as a formal means of photography seeks to subvert what is specific about the medium – the snapshot, the transient image – through temporality; everything is to be made for eternity, and hence Pierre and Marie-Claire Bourdieu ultimately compare the peasants posing motionlessly in wedding photos with the arrangements and poses to be found in Byzantine mosaics.[14]

A second theoretical innovation that may be linked with Bourdieu's photo project revolves around the concept of cultural legitimacy. In this way, the question is also addressed as to why photography is to be assessed, in Bourdieu's view, as an illegitimate art. What is produced with the invention of photography is the notion that it involves a neutral model of depiction that guarantees objectivity and authenticity. In this sense, photography imbues the linear perspective and the mode of seeing associated with it with a mechanical basis. Here Bourdieu, influenced by the works of Pierre Francastel, takes over the questioning of this objectivism that is today taken for granted as one of the paradigms of visual studies, set in motion in the discipline of art history by the influential essay by Erwin Panofsky on "The Perspective as Symbolic Form" in the 1920s. "The camera provides the vision of the Cyclops, not of man," is said there; in the sense of semiotics Bourdieu understands photography as a "conventional system which expresses space in terms of the laws of perspective [...]."[15] Yet if photography does not represent a final, objective definition of visual reality, but rather only a "symbolic form" (to paraphrase Panofsky), which developed during the Italian renaissance into a habitually anchored mode of seeing, this results in a sociological interpretation of the process: then the apparent relationship between realism, objective depiction and photography is a socially intended feature of the images and not based on the technical nature of photography. From this theoretical perspective, photography is successful as a medium, because it ties into a culturally specific mode of seeing. [16]

Bourdieu argues that specifically this realism effect of photography is especially attractive for the lower classes of society, because it accommodates the aesthetic ambitions of a functionalist aesthetic. In his view, this is where the dividing line runs between legitimate

and illegitimate: as long as photography "will be justified by the object photographed "[17] – in the selection in terms of what can be photographed – we find ourselves in the realm of aesthetics, where it is a matter of photography for the sake of photography. In other words, it is not photography as a technique that lacks the possibility of acknowledging the legitimate value of high culture, but rather its social use as a democratic medium of objectivism: accessible to everyone, usable without elaborate preparation – this is the reason for the lack of acknowledgment in a society based and layered on distinction. Contrary to photography's capacity for confusing the conventional order of the visible through its fleeting character, as a popular medium it serves to affirm the visible. In this way, it misses the imperative of the Kantian aesthetic of "disinterested pleasure". Consequently it is susceptible to the Kantian "barbaric taste", because it is able to ideally assume tasks that lie outside itself or to influence the ethos of the users.

Bourdieu does not at all take over this Kantian construction of "disinterested pleasure", as literature has occasionally imputed. For him it represents a typical expression of the bourgeois ethos and habitus; the "disinterestedness" is based on material security and on moral and intellectual superiority, for which reason it functions as a central instrument of distinction. It is interesting how Bourdieu is able to represent this logic of distinction on the basis of his empirical findings in relation to photography. Indeed, photography can be found in all social classes (except among the peasants, but even in this group, peasant women may photograph their children), and specifically this superficial impression is typically assumed by the theoreticians of mass culture to associate a general decline in culture with it. In fact, Bourdieu finds that the practices of photography in the upper classes are just as functionalist as those of the petit bourgeois or the working class. Subtle differences

are nevertheless evident, when the people questioned express their attitudes about the aesthetic qualities of photography or in the way they arrange photography in practice. Bourdieu therefore distinguishes between the “seasonal conformists”, who dominate in all classes and essentially depict what is not an everyday occurrence for integration in the world of the family, and the “impassioned amateurs”, who are anomically poled in Durkheim’s sense, namely young, unmarried and belonging to childless families. They develop aesthetic ambitions, but regularly fall short of them. The logic of distinction comes into play in the moment when a break with socially disseminated seasonal conformist photography is attempted in trying to establish differentness. Parts of the rising middle class consciously dispense with family purposes, because the “odium of the commonplace” adheres to photography. Workers, the majority of which reject considering photography as art, are still willing to situate photography above painting; for them, the question of the aesthetic value of photography is nonsensical, because their class ethos does not allow for following Adorno’s statement about the function of art: “Insofar as a social function can be predicated for artworks, it is their functionlessness.”[18] This “happy relationship to photography” no longer predominates in the world of employees; the shadow of the great arts falls on it; their commentaries are ambivalent, as on the one hand a “photo is ultimately like a painting”, on the other their own endeavors to take photographs are regularly sanctioned, because “that has no style”[19]. The logic of distinction approaches its apex when, in the districts of the Paris upper class, where conspicuously few photographs are taken, someone like Bourdieu says that “really spontaneous sociology that comes from the satirical anecdotes and critical half thoughts on the absurdities of certain photographic devotees” is to be found.[20] Beginning with Emile Zola’s ironic statement that something may first be regarded as seen when it has

been photographed, an entire arsenal of distancing develops, which in Bourdieu's view is intended to express a habitually anchored feeling of superiority; in later writing Bourdieu subsumes these kinds of behavior under the term "class-racism". Photography thus certainly enables actualizing an aesthetic attitude on the basis of a certain, already existing disposition, even if this is not implemented in one's own photographic practice. At the same time, photography also opens up an opportunity to the upper classes to fortify their status with a defamation of this kind of vulgar "popular art". On the whole, Bourdieu's view of the differentiation processes in the appropriation of photography suggests a counter-position to the theoreticians of mass culture, who have particularly decried the homogenizing effect of this medium.

The most frequently mentioned objection to *Un art moyen* is probably that at least certain segments of photography have progressed over the past four decades to become a legitimate cultural practice. In *Un art moyen* Jean Claude Chamboredon took the part of analyzing so-called "artistic photography", in other words the area fighting for artistic recognition.[21] He examined virtuoso photographers and their legitimation strategies; Brassai, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Man Ray are quoted at length. All attempts to found a separate aesthetic discourse end in a confusion of statements that only have in common that they express an artistic ambition, but one without a basis in the apparatus itself. According to Chamboredon, legitimacy is constructed by futilely borrowing concepts from the high arts. In this sense, in the early 1960s photography found itself in a situation similar to that of jazz, for example, or film criticism, but with the additional difficulty of having to formulate a different appropriation of the medium contrary to the tremendous spread of photographic practice as an *art moyen*. Nevertheless, Chamboredon assumes that the virtuoso

photographers prepared the way for a legitimate variant of photography, for example through their "unanimous call for the establishment of a museum of photography".[22] Interestingly, photography was substantially elevated just at the same time that *Un art moyen* was published. In the Museum of Modern Art in New York, John Szarkowski was appointed head of the photography department as successor to the populist Edward Steichen. Szarkowski sought to transfer Clement Greenberg's modernism theory to photography with a formalist vocabulary – to thus place his exhibition photographers (e.g. Gary Winogrand, Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander and William Eggleston) in an artistic context. At the same time, photography was also increasingly appearing in the 1960s in the work of contemporary artists (e.g. John Baldessari, Ed Rucha, Dan Graham). Yet this valorized photography led to a form of practice that had to complete a break, a negation of professional, technically defined photography, in order to paradoxically move closer to amateur photography. In a recently published book on the relationship between art and photography, it is stated that art has become photographic, but not that photography has become an art, because that would suggest a unity that does not in fact exist.[23] In the early 1960s Chamboredon did not sufficiently recognize this internal differentiation in dealing with photography, especially in the field of artistic production. The manner of speaking of a "photographic field" could have indicated specifically these battles for legitimacy from the perspective of the producers. Of course, Bourdieu did not devote his attention to the development of a field theory until the early 1970s, so what is undertaken in the context of *Un art moyen* are more ideology-critical "exposures" in the discourse of the actors. In the 1960s John Szarkowsky succeeded in giving an "aestheticized author-voice" to the heirs of the American documentary tradition and presenting photography as art through

his work at the MoMA. When the influential art theorist Benjamin Buchloh later called these photographers "pseudo-artists" to distinguish them from artists who use photography in their art, this only shows that we are dealing here with a field, in which there is something at stake; it is a battle over recognition, over inclusion and exclusion, but now at the center of legitimate culture.[24] In this way we can distinguish two "legitimate" subfields of photographic production, which became part of the art field in the 1960s: museumized documentary photography and artists who used the medium of photography to indicate a new artistic position with it.

Yet the real breakthrough of photography is not linked with these laborious battles for recognition, but rather with a kind of implosion of aesthetic difference in the world of painting and sculptural art due to the questioning of originality, subjective expressiveness and formal singularity because of the influence of photography.[25] The art theory paradigm shift, which Rosalind Krauss has analyzed in her work, is based, among other things, on a precise reading of *Un art moyen*. Krauss writes: "For certain artists, photography opened up the closed categories of the older aesthetic discourses to the most difficult threat possible and turned it around completely. In light of their power to effect this – in other words, calling into question the entire concept of the uniqueness of the art object, the originality of its author, the coherence of the oeuvre within which it was created, and the individuality of so-called self-expression – it is clear that, with all due respect to Bourdieu, there is a discourse that is intrinsic to photography [which Bourdieu did not consider possible, CB]. We must add, however, that this is not an aesthetic discourse. It is a project of deconstruction, in the course of which art distances and separates itself from itself."[26] This essay by Rosalind Krauss is from 1983, which means that it

was written nearly two decades after the publication of *Un art moyen*. It shows that Bourdieu's sociological analysis of photography played an important role in a certain phase of determining what legitimate art can even be, when it is exposed using the tool of photography. It is an irony of history that Krauss takes Bourdieu's precise and demystifying analysis of photography to make use of it as an instrument of deconstruction against legitimate art, whereas Bourdieu, in the early 1960s, took it completely for granted that there was an intact, highly legitimate aesthetic field that excluded photography, because it was not able to develop originality, authenticity or a formal vocabulary. It was specifically this lack that made photography interesting for a certain advanced field of art in the 1960s and 70s.

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[1] Franz Schultheis / Christine Frisinghelli (Ed.), *Pierre Bourdieu, In Algerien. Zeugnisse der Entwurzelung*, Graz 2003, p. 48.

[2] Pierre Bourdieu / Loïc J.D. Wacquant, *Réponses. Pour une anthropologie réflexive*, Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 1992; Engl.: *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Chicago/Ill.: University of Chicago Press & Cambridge/UK: Polity Press 1992, p. 163.

[3] The term *classes moyennes* referred to the rising lower middle class – especially the petit bourgeois – particularly associated with the new service professions. The French title *Un art moyen* alluded to this term that was vehemently discussed in sociology at that time.

[4] Pierre and Marie-Claire Bourdieu, "The Peasant and Photography", in: *Ethnography*, Vol 5(4), 2004, p. 601–616. The

article was first published in 1965 in the *Revue française de sociologie* vol.6, no.2, p. 164–74.

[5] Pierre Bourdieu/ Boltanski / Castel / Chamboredon / Lagneau / Schnapper, *Un art moyen. Essais sur les usages sociaux de la photographie,* Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit 1965; Engl.: *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*, Cambridge/UK.: Polity Press 1990.

[6] Ibid., p. 603. Pierre Bourdieu later used this passage in *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*,. Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Cult of Unity and Cultivated Differences", in: Bourdieu et al. 1990, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

[7] Ibid., p. 608. This quotation is also found later in: Bourdieu et al. 1990, op. cit., p. 49.

[8] In an article by Bourdieu & Passeron from 1963, they counter authors who ascribe a homogenizing effect to mass culture and call them "mass mediologists". Pierre Bourdieu/ Jean-Claude Passeron, "Sociologues des Mythologies et Mythologies de Sociologues", in: *Les Temps Modernes,* No. 211, Decembre 1963, p. 998–1021.

[9] Pierre Bourdieu, *Ein soziologischer Selbstversuch. Translated from French by Stephan Egger. With an afterword by Franz Schultheis,* Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2002, p. *116 (Esquisse pour une auto-analyse*, Collection Cours et Travaux, Raisons d'Agir Éditions 2004).

[10] Pierre and Marie-Claire Bourdieu 2004, op. cit., p. 610ff.

[11] Bourdieu et al, 1990, op.cit., p. 82.

[12] Ibid., p. 193.

[13] Ibid., p. 82.

[14] Cf. Pierre and Marie-Claire Bourdieu, 2004, op.cit.

[15] The quotation is from Pierre Francastel, *Peinture et Société*, Lyon 1951, p. 47; quoted in: Bourdieu et al. 1965, op. cit. p. 73-74.

[16] Cf. W.M. Ivens, *Prints and Visual Communication*, Cambridge 1953.

[17] Bourdieu et al., 1990, op.cit. p. 78.

[18] Theodor W.Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, Frankfurt a. M. 1970, p. 336.

[19] Bourdieu et al., 1990, op.cit., p. 60.

[20] Ibid., p. 68.

[21] Jean-Claude Chamboredon, "Mechanical Art , Natural Art: Photographic Artists", in: Bourdieu et al., 1990, op.cit., pp. 129.

[22] Ibid., p. 149.

[23] David Campany (Ed.), *Kunst und Fotografie; Art and Photography*, German edition, Berlin 2005. See the introduction: "Survey" by David Campany. In the English edition, p. 11–45.

[24] Benjamin H. Buchloh, "Allan Sekula: Photography between Discourse and Document", in: Allan Sekula, *Fish Story*, Düsseldorf, 1995, p. 192.

[25] This argument has been developed by Rosalind Krauss. See Rosalind Krauss, "A Note on Photography and the Simulacral", *October* 31 (1984), pp. 49-68.

[26] Ibid., p. 63.