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Bourdieu’s Photography of Coevalness

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In Algeria in the late 1950s, Pierre Bourdieu developed a scientific practice that, apart from its other methodological achievements and sociological or ethnological findings, is characterized by a remarkable departure from a convention of ethnographic representation. If Bourdieu is regarded as an ethnologist as far as his work in Algeria is concerned, then he is clearly an ethnologist who from the very outset contravenes the ethnographic custom of the “denial of coevalness”. Here, I would like to interpret Bourdieu’s photographic practice in Algeria as the visual manifestation of a chronopolitics that deviates in the most remarkable way from the dominant chronopolitics of ethnology which structures the relationship of the self and others.

As is well known, Bourdieu attached considerable importance to the time factor in his investigations into economy and culture in the Algerian transitional society. He does this, for example, where he discusses the clash between different interpretations of the economic – i.e. traditional Algerian and western capitalist concepts and behaviours with regard to saving, laying in supplies and investment – arguing diverging concepts of time and different forms of rationality. It was not simply a matter of scientifically

surveying specific economic cultures for Bourdieu. He also understood their exact representation, as Franz Schultheis has shown in his intellectual biography of Bourdieu[1], in the sense of a rehabilitation of a culture that, from a colonially racist point of view, was stubbornly reacting against the "civilizing mission" of the French and, to a narrow, Eurocentric understanding of rationality, appeared incapable of modernization. To the young philosopher sent off to do military service in Algeria as punishment for criticizing the Algerian war, the description of another, ethnocentrically misjudged culture, and of another economy unrecognized because of a universalization of the capitalist economy, was also a criticism of capitalism and colonialism. Bourdieu's conceptualization itself does not always escape such universalization as, for example, when he describes the other economy as pre-capitalist, thereby defining a general logic of development in terms of a linear view of time. However, Bourdieu also situates his descriptions of the "before" and "after" within the dominant context of colonialism, which means he also analyses the traditional culture in the circumstances of change or, more precisely, of the destruction it is undergoing at the time.

As an example of this, we can cite the comparative study of the traditional Kabyle house and the resettlement camps set up by the French, in which the same individuals experience different social and gender relationships. If one reads the study of the Kabyle house[2] in isolation, as – Schultheis argues – its initial reception did, then it may be considered an example of a structural analysis, and it is actually astonishing how much this piece of Bourdieu's ethnology owes to a style of writing, the timelessness of which follows the model of the "ethnographic present", which Johannes Fabian identified as the grammatical tense of ethnographic writing. "The ethnographic present is the practice of giving accounts of

other cultures and societies in the present tense", writes Fabian in his book, *Time and the Other. How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, published in 1983. For Fabian, the relationship of anthropology to its subject has always been organized in significant correlations of oppositions such as Here-There and Now-Then, which he interprets as distancing techniques between the subject and object of ethnographic practice, and which he sees in turn as the result of the overarching colonial production of distance between the West and the Rest. Alongside the once dominant "evolutionist time" that establishes other cultures at earlier stages on a time axis, the most evolved stage of which is embodied by the anthropologist's own culture, Fabian identifies "encapsulated time", which he associates with functionalist and structuralist practices of ethnography. Both concepts of time, according to Fabian, are distinguished, albeit in different ways, by a "denial of coevalness": "By that I mean a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse."[3] Fabian's reflections revolve around, among other things, the question of what becomes or could become of a further type of time in the ethnographic report, i.e. "intersubjective time", defined as the time shared interactively in communication by the fieldworker and the research subjects from whom he/she obtains his/her data, along with observation. Reading about Bourdieu's Kabyle house in isolation – where an unspoken subject speaks to unspoken interlocutors about a firmly established transhistorical world of homologies of micro- and macrostructures – would thoroughly support Fabian's assertion that "the present tense 'freezes' a society at the time of observation; at worst, it contains assumptions about the repetitiveness, predictability and conservatism of primitives"[4].

But if one reads *The Kabyle House* as representing Bourdieu's research practice, together with his analyses of the resettlement camps and the discrepancies that these enforced between the old habitus and new social structures, then one finds oneself very close to one of the questions raised by Fabian about the postcolonial reconfiguration of the relationship of power or, to be more precise, discourse and time: "It takes imagination and courage to picture what would happen to the West (and to anthropology) if its temporal fortress were suddenly invaded by the Time of the Other."[5]

The war in Algeria, with the violent resistance of a society described, distanced and located in orientalist models by colonialism and its leading sciences, was a situation which made such an invasion by the 'Time of the Other' possible. It would probably also have been possible in the late 1950s, as an ethnologist anywhere in rural Algeria, "to dive into the lives of the natives" in the sense of the principles of fieldwork established by Malinowski, alone and cut off from one's own culture, using the researcher's isolation as the main means of discovery, in order to generate "knowledge" about the "spirit" of a foreign culture and thus defend that temporal fortress of anthropology, which in reality was crumbling with each bomb in a street cafe. Pierre Bourdieu's interest was directed at precisely those social and cultural phenomena produced by the clash between the "western" and the "foreign" culture in conditions of colonial rule and a war of liberation. Unlike most representatives of a discipline which he is only beginning to acquire through practice in these conditions – Claude Lévi-Strauss for example – whose *Tristes Tropiques* was published when Bourdieu arrived in Algeria, he is neither searching for the completely Other of an untouched culture, nor bemoaning the passing of those times when, for the ethnographer, there was

still the “thrilling prospect” of “being the first white man to visit a particular native community”[6]. While Lévi-Strauss constantly has the impression that he has come too late to be able to follow an ethnographic ideal, Bourdieu proceeds resolutely – despite and indeed because of the oppressive circumstances – from a historico-political present, in which an ethnographic establishing of the “style” (Lévi-Strauss) or the “spirit” (Malinowski) of a culture was rendered impossible by the transformation of living conditions accelerated by war.

It is, in my view, worth mentioning at this point that the fields of research and the observations of the “occasional” sociologist Bourdieu (Schultheis) correspond to the accounts of another occasional sociologist, Frantz Fanon, on several points. In *Aspects of the Algerian Revolution,* written in 1959 and published originally in French as *Sociologie d’une révolution*, Fanon reaches similar conclusions regarding the revolution in family and gender relations triggered by resettlement, the rural exodus and unemployment, the re-evalution of values, the changed role of women, the symbolism of the veil and even the contradictions between changed living conditions and a habitus corresponding to the old structures. In 1959, Fanon wrote: “The regrouped mechta is a broken, destroyed mechta. It is merely a group of men, women and children. Under these conditions, no gesture is kept intact. No previous rhythm is to be found unaltered. Caught in the meshes of the barbed wires, the members of the regrouped Algerian families neither eat nor sleep as they did before.”[7]

In 1960, Pierre Bourdieu makes the point in a generalized form: “The simple fact of a change in dwelling-place – whether to a reception camp, to the city or to France – brings about a comprehensive change in attitude towards the world.”[8] In 1959 Fanon writes: “With these considerable shifts in population, the

whole social panorama and the perceptual framework are disturbed and restructured."[9]

While Bourdieu and Fanon, in spite of their very different working methods, are often very close in terms of the analysis of sociological and cultural changes – a worthy subject of investigation in itself – their paths diverge when it comes to their respective assessments of loss and gain. In many correspondences relating to uprooting, destabilizing and profound transition, Fanon – working for the Algerian liberation front – deduces from these the power of the Algerian revolution, whereas Bourdieu points out the insecurity and resignation of his informants to a greater extent.[10]

In the following discussion, I wish to consider Bourdieu's Algerian photographs in relation to his social anthropology, which is supported by a recognition of coevalness, but will first of all take a look at colonial visual politics in Algeria, bearing in mind the politics of the time.

From a historical point of view, photography played a decisive part in the ethnological denial of coevalness. In a book on colonial photography, Paul Landau writes: "The seemingly objective visual presence of Africans, and the plangent specificity and realness of photographs, stabilized "authenticity" and obscured a world of politics and labor that people in Europe did not wish to see."[11] Here, Landau clearly expresses how photography generates the availability of an image of difference and authenticity by freeing its subjects' appearance from the real world of economics and politics. From different contexts, and also from ethnologists' texts not intended for publication, we know about the staging of "authentic" representatives of a people through the preliminary removal from their appearance of any signs of contemporaneity with the image's creator or of visible indications of cultural "contamination".

The European image of Algeria was shaped, at least up to the 1930s, by the photographs and postcards coated with a pseudo-ethnographic veneer, which were circulated in large numbers. In a continuation of nineteenth-century orientalist painting, this photographic image production focused in the main on two types of subject area, alongside idyllic-exotic landscapes: on imagining the harem as a space inaccessible to men, painters and photographers and therefore one inspiring fantasy, and on the veil as the ever-present sign of a culture and as the symbol of a denial of visibility. Frantz Fanon described the item of clothing as such: "The fact of belonging to a given cultural group is usually revealed by clothing traditions. [...] In the Arab world [...] the veil worn by women is at once noticed by the tourist. [...] For [...] the foreigner, the veil demarcates both Algerian society and its feminine component. [...] The 'haik' very clearly demarcates the Algerian colonized society."[12]

Malek Alloula, who has analysed these postcards in detail, begins his attempt to "return [them] to the sender" with a similar assertion, expanding on it thus: "The first thing the foreign eye catches about Algerian women is that they are concealed from sight. No doubt this very obstacle to sight is a powerful prod to the photographer operating in urban environments. [...] Algerian society, particularly the world of women, is forever forbidden to him."[13]

The refusal of visibility (veil and sealed-off female space) provokes a colonial representation of showing, making visible, revealing and taking possession. And the linking of veil and culture produces the ethnographic alibis that characterize the captions ("Young Moorish Women" or "Kabyle Women") of the more or less pornographic postcards.

In these images, colonial society takes its revenge on the cultural refusal of the colonized. Through the unveiling and uncovering of the women, it symbolically gives full expression to its thwarted desire for a complete ideological penetration of the colonial space on other levels. This image production replaces a society shaped by confrontation and cultural struggle with an orientalist fantasy and refuses to accept the actual presence of this society by constructing a timeless space of imagined difference. In this respect, it corresponds to a formula coined by Edward Said on the subject of orientalism in general: "In the system of knowledge about the Orient, the Orient is less a place than a *topos*." [14]

Given the theme of the symposium, "Representation of the Other"[15], it may be asserted that the Other/Others represented in the colonial postcards is/are subject to a form of appropriation, which allows them to become completely absorbed in the discourse of the West/the colonizer. (After all, they talk about nothing else.) In contrast to this attempt to deny the resistance of the colonized and this neutralizing of conflict and violence into an enforced harmony, the photos taken by Marc Garanger in 1960 in Kabylia show precisely that violence and resistance. Garanger, an unwilling soldier like Bourdieu in a war he disapproved of, was given the task of taking pictures, for use in identity cards, of women who had been transplanted from their villages to the camps. The degrading act of enforced unveiling before the enemy's camera, a form of symbolic violence in the immediate context of the physical violence of resettlement, results in a silent expression of identity, denial and resistance. "The only way of protesting was through their look", Garanger later writes. "They glared at me from point-blank range; I was the first to witness their silent but fierce protest."[16] Believing that these images would express the opposite of what their clients saw in them, Garanger smuggled some photos into

Switzerland in 1961 to publish them in a magazine there. In these images, we are dealing with a radical opposite to the denial of coevalness in the orientalist genre of postcards. In an article on Garanger's *Femmes Algériennes*, Carole Naggar asks: "So why is it that, being victims, the Algerian women do not appear to be such? [...] What we read here is a refusal. Saying no, the women seem to add: 'Even if you have photographed us, we remain uncontrollable.'"[17] The Other is immediately present here, because the series not only demonstrates the interrelation between ruling and making visible, but also the violent act of substituting a personal and cultural identity with a conception of identity determined by colonial politics.

From a cursory glance at Bourdieu's Algerian photographs, one has the impression that the subjects might flee from the photographer. Or, to put it another way, that the photographer sneaks after the subjects, lies in wait for them. This applies particularly to the images of people produced in the urban space, less so to those photos taken in the countryside. Bourdieu frequently photographs [his subjects] from a hidden angle, training his sights on people from a distance and mostly from behind. Even when he is closer to the subjects, his angles of vision have something clandestine about them. The camera that Bourdieu used, its viewfinder on top of the casing, allowed him to take photographs, unobserved, from a low-lying angle of vision. "It was very useful for me", Bourdieu recalls, "that was how I was able to take photos without people noticing [...] for example when you want to photograph a woman in a country where this is frowned upon."[18] Although the situation is a specific one because of the war and its attendant vigilance on both sides and the cognitive interests diverge, this use of the camera also brings to mind an old discourse on the use of technical recording devices in ethnography. For example, Rudolf Pöch, an

Austrian researcher and media pioneer in anthropology, made the corresponding observations in 1904 about film. “For Pöch”, writes Fatimah Tobing Rony, “the advantage of film is that it allows for true voyeurism because images could be captured without the native’s awareness.”[19] When Bourdieu says, in retrospect, that “time and time again in Algeria, [he] accompanied photographers on their photo-reportage work and noticed that they didn’t talk at all to the people they photographed” [20], it must be said that the majority of his own photographs communicate the very same impression. If people are photographed directly from the front in the urban images, they are mostly children who are generally interested in standing in front of the foreigner’s camera, or else traders with their wares who are already trying to attract the attention of passers-by anyway. Apart from the hidden viewpoints and the children and traders playing for the camera, there is a group of photos that could be attributed to the unobserved observer perspective, had the latter not met with a counter-gaze at the decisive moment. Given the pursuer’s perspective that records the individuals or groups engaged in activities or conversations the meaning of which is unclear, one sometimes has the feeling of having stumbled into a detective or spy story; so, for example, the woman in the group of veiled women outside a shoe shop who returns the gaze would mark the moment when the unobserved observer is uncovered. This “mistake” on the part of the photographer actually makes the story more thrilling. But what kind of story are we dealing with here?

In the course of this symposium, we will learn about Bourdieu’s photographic practice from people who have been more closely engaged with it and over a longer period. I wonder myself at this point whether Bourdieu deployed the voyeuristic gaze of the unobserved photographer as do many of us when nowadays,

decades later, we take photographs in foreign surroundings and are conscious of the incongruity of an openly visible desire for images; or whether Bourdieu has, instead, objectified this observer's perspective to such an extent that he clearly indicates it with the presence of the distanced observer, inscribed in the images themselves? I wish to return now to the question of the chronopolitics of ethnographic representation and examine it – not entirely legitimately – by considering the urban photographs only. Basically, I have the feeling with almost all the photos that Bourdieu is concerned with an image of coevalness, which he often tries to produce by contrasting what appears to be non-coeval. Two veiled women outside a western record store into which a crowd, dressed in western clothes, is pushing; the women in the *haik* in front of the shop window displaying high-heeled shoes; families or couples at the Algiers trade fair, the women in traditional garb, the men and children dressed in "western" style; children, young and old Algerians at a kiosk, studying American comics; a veiled woman at a kiosk displaying magazines propagating a European idyll of the nuclear family with titles like *Femmes d'Aujourd'hui*. If one examines these photographs against the background of Bourdieu's writings, it is easy to recognize the themes of migration to the city by an uprooted rural population, of unemployment, on which the photograph of the retailer or the individuals destabilized by waiting or looking for something is based. However, in my opinion, all the images referred to above all support the intention to provide proof of a – thoroughly contradictory – sociocultural coevalness by coupling specific signifiers of the foreign and the Western, of tradition and modernity within an image. While Marc Garanger tackles an intensification of the confrontation between colonial power and the colonized, it seems to me that Bourdieu, whose choice of subject is far freer, wants to show an ambivalent mix of partial assimilation and partial insistence on, or sense of

being trapped within, traditional culture with regard to the Algerians' prospects for the future. The culture of the producer of the image and the subjects represented act in the same historico-politically defined space, even though their position within it is very different.

There is a photo by Bourdieu that really struck me when I opened Fanon's *Sociologie d'une révolution* again and re-read the chapter about the Algerians' relationship with the radio. Bourdieu's image shows a female figure, photographed from behind from the hidden perspective that is typical of him; cloaked in the *haik* and carrying a basket on her head, she is passing by the window of an electrical shop. So on the street, we find the almost orientalist character combination of veil and basket on the head, behind the shop window a few records, record-players and a TV, but above all a variety of radio sets as a sign of a modern media society.

Fanon writes: "Before 1954, a radio in an Algerian house was the mark of Europeanization in progress, of vulnerability. It was the conscious opening to the influence of the dominator [...]."[21] Later in 1956, the "Voice of Free Algeria" went on air and there was a "battle of the airwaves" between the French and the resistance; "the radio becomes indispensable", writes Fanon, "by means of the radio, a technique rejected before 1954, the Algerian people decided to relaunch the revolution"[22]. "The foreign technique, which had been 'digested' in connection with the national struggle, had become a fighting instrument for the people and a protective organ against anxiety",[23] according to Fanon. Now there has been no direct encounter between Bourdieu's socioanthropological and photographic work and Fanon's work on revolutionary theory. Nor can the positions of the white French intellectual and the black resistance activist in the anti-colonial struggle be summed up in a single point. Nevertheless, in view of

some of the photographs – such as those just referred to – it seems that Bourdieu's production of images from Algeria, aimed so determinedly at the contradictory, conflict-scarred coevalness of the colonial self and the colonized other, might well correspond on the visual level to Fanon's analyses. Only very few ethnological studies have ever achieved a similar degree of correspondence with revolutionary endeavours.

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[1] Franz Schultheis, *Bourdieus Wege in die Soziologie*, Constance 2007.

[2] Pierre Bourdieu, „Das Haus oder die verkehrte Welt", in: Bourdieu, *Sozialer Sinn. Kritik der theoretischen Vernunft*, Frankfurt a. M. 1987.

[3] Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other. How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, New York 1983, p. 31.

[4] Ibid., p. 81.

[5] Ibid., p. 34.

[6] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, tr. John and Doreen Weightman, Penguin: London, 1973, p. 425.

[7] Frantz Fanon, trans. by Haakon Chevalier, *A Dying Colonialism*, New York: Grove Press, 2000, p. 117.

[8] Pierre Bourdieu, „Krieg und gesellschaftlicher Wandel in Algerien", quoted from: Franz Schultheis / Christine Frisinghelli (Ed.), *Pierre Bourdieu. In Algerien. Zeugnisse der Entwurzelung*, Graz 2003, p. 66.

[9] Fanon 2000, op. cit., p. 117.

[10] The discourse on the Algerian war and its social and psychic consequences is dominated extensively by men, even when, again and again, the topic is the role of women. This is also borne out, alongside the observations of Fanon, Bourdieu and Alloula, by the superb film *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) by Gillo Pontecorvo. In these representations, real experiences and scopes of action of the women involved and affected, such as those portrayed by Assia Djebar in *Children of the New World. A Novel of the Algerian War* (1962), are sold somewhat short. The experiences of war and rebellion, painful as well as emancipatory, are expressed very differently from a female perspective from how the above-mentioned authors treat them.

[11] Paul S. Landau, „Empires of the Visual: Photography and Colonial Administration in Africa“, in: Paul S. Landau / Deborah D. Kaspin (Ed.), *Images and Empires. Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa*, Berkeley / Los Angeles / London 2002, p. 161.

[12] Fanon 2000, op. cit., p. 35 f.

[13] Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, tr. by Myrna Godzich and Wlad Godzich, Minnesota 1986, p. 7.

[14] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient*, London 1978, p. 177.

[15] Representations of the “Other”. The Visual Anthropology of Pierre Bourdieu, Symposium on the 6th, 7th and 15th July, 2007 in Leipzig, Berlin and Lüneburg, organized by the *Kunstraum* of Leuphana University, Lüneburg and the *Galerie der HGB,* Leipzig, http://translate.eipcp.net/Actions/discursive/bourdieu.

[16] Quoted from: David A. Bailey / Gilane Tawadros (Ed.), *Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art*, London 2003, p. 87.

[17] Carole Naggar, „The Unveiled: Algerian Women“, in: *Aperture* 119, 1990, quoted from: Liz Heron / Val Williams (Ed.), *Illuminations. Women Writing on Photography from the 1850s to the Present*, London / New York 1996.

[18] Pierre Bourdieu in conversation with Franz Schultheis, in: Schultheis / Frisinghelli (Ed.) 2003, op. cit., p 23 ff.

[19] Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle*, Durham / London 1996, p. 66.

[20] Pierre Bourdieu in conversation with Franz Schultheis, in: Schultheis / Frisinghelli (Ed.) 2003, op. cit., p. 26.

[21] Fanon 2000, op. cit., p. 92.

[22] Ibid., p. 93.

[23] Ibid., p. 89.