Social Theory, Photography and the Visual Aesthetic of Cultural Modernity

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Abstract

Social theory and photographic aesthetics both engage with issues of representation, realism and validity, having crossed paths in theoretical and methodological controversies. This discussion begins with reflections on the realism debate in photography, arguing that beyond the polar positions of realism and constructivism the photographic image is essentially ambivalent, reflecting the ways in which it is situated within cultural modernity. The discussion draws critically on Simmel's sociology of the visual to elucidate these issues and compares his concept of social forms and their development with the emergence of the photograph. Several dimensions of ambivalence are elaborated with reference to the politics and aesthetics socially engaged photography in the first half of the 20th century. It presents a case for the autonomy of the photographic as a social form that nonetheless has the potential to point beyond reality to immanent possibilities. The discussion exemplifies the processes of aesthetic formation with reference to the 'New Vision' artwork of László Moholy-Nagy and the social realism of Edith Tudor Hart.

There is a long-running debate over realism and constructivism in photography, which this discussion revisits through exploration of the interaction between social theory and photographic aesthetics. Photography and sociology, as Howard Becker (1974) noted, 'have approximately the same birth date' around 1839, when Comte first used the term (sociology) and Daguerre made public his method for fixing an image on a plate. Thus, positivism and the camera, as an instrument of recording the world, 'grew up together' as John Berger put it (Berger, 2013: 81). However, both fields are

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embroiled in controversies over realism and, it is suggested here, these mirrored each other at least during the formative interwar period. The politics and aesthetics of these years are a productive ground for exploring the controversies over representation and truth, indexicality and symbol, which vacillated between blurred movements of abstraction and photographic realism. Modernism facilitated a new economy of the senses in which vision was a medium of recognition but one challenged by forms of abstraction which claimed to reveal non-representational truth. Martin Jay's 'crisis of faith in optical empiricism' in modernist culture (Jay, 1993) is echoed in Susan Sontag's (1977) critique of photography's aestheticization of the world as privileging 'images' over 'real things', at least until she modified her view (Sontag, 2003). The argument presented is that the issue is less one of vision vs. materiality so much as of the modalities of the aestheticization of modern life and its constitution of the real. Georg Simmel's sociology of the visual is used as a vector for this exploration since, as de la Fuente (2008) argues, his theory is unusual in its intersection of aesthetics and sociology and treating aesthetics as generative of deep social phenomena.[1] The works of László Moholy-Nagy, reflecting Bauhaus experimental constructivism, and the social realist photography of the German and Austrian workers' photographic movements are examined as examples of the ways in which contrasting aesthetic styles engaged with the emerging social forms of cultural modernity. In relation to the latter in particular, the photography of Edith Tudor Hart illustrates how, despite its aspiration to rigorous objectivity, and critique of bourgeois aesthetics, this style also contained modernist ambivalences and a distinctive stylization.

Photographic Representation – Beyond Realism and Conventionalism

The photograph is 'one of the most complex and problematic forms of representation' (Clarke, 1997: 27) and its ambivalence has been noted in photographic theory. Its early reception revolved around the (apparent) permanence of the image as opposed to the transitory nature of experience; however, this relationship proved to be complex and disputed, such that 'for much of its existence photography has been riven by disagreements about the nature, function and effect of the medium' (Ainsworth, forthcoming). Positivistic naturalism regarded the photograph as a mechanical copy of an external scene requiring minimal human interference, so 'photography affects us like a phenomenon in nature' and gains its objectivity from its very production process (Bazin, 1960:13). Indeed, subsequent disputes about the truth value of photographic images, such as that over whether Robert Capa's 'Falling Soldier' was 'real' (i.e. taken at the moment of death) or was rather staged (a pro-filmic event), are significant in that they demonstrate the proposition 'that a photo may count as a lie presumes that it can or should primarily count as truthful' (Sekula, 1986). Similarly, truth-claims are central to photojournalism's mission, as Suzie Linfield claims, to expose violence, make it visible and show us 'a world unfit for habitation' (Linfield, 2010: 33). In the late 19th century Jacob Riis's images were intended as instruments for social change and his *How the Other Half Lives* (1971) was an early manifestation of photojournalism that documented

squalid living conditions in New York City slums in the 1880s. Indeed, the genre of socially committed realist photography, Peter Hamilton suggests, 'gave a harder political and documentary edge to the nouvelle vision, which had been emerging since the mid-1920s as an antidote to pictorialism' stimulating the 'socially-aware photography' of Capa, Ronis, Doisneau and Cartier-Bresson (Hamilton, 2018: 15). The truthfulness of the photograph was a claim central to social documentary, as well as to the photographic and artistic movements such as *Neue Sachlichkeit*,[2] which is discussed later in this article.

One approach to this, which Hariman and Lucaites propose, is to regard photography as doubly defined by its relation to reality and the imagination. Thus, while more or less accurate and interpretive, and realism 'has to be the first principle', this cannot be without imagination, which is an essential dimension of the image (Hariman and Lucaites, 2017: 58). This evokes the idea of photography's 'double indexicality' suggested by Robin Kelsey and Blake Stimson that the photograph points indexically both to its referent and back to the photographer, thus mediating between the subject and the world (Kelsey and Stimson, 2008: xi). The optic then has to have some purchase on the event that a viewer can recognize while deploying a critical imagination that evokes the potential for social change. However, imagination takes us into realms of fantasy and the unconscious, 'the "inner illumination" which is a hallmark of suspicion of the visual' (Jay, 1993: 108). Photography once promised to fulfil the Enlightenment dream of a universal language unmediated by symbolic interpretation, but the messy contingency of the photograph rendered this impossible. To the extent that photographs are 'effects of the radiations from the object', they are indexical signs, whereas if they are symbolic then they are governed by convention and rules. By the 1920s, aesthetically ambitious photographers abandoned the painterly imperative and followed divergent paths – some embraced pictorial rhetoric influenced by Dadaism and Surrealism (e.g. Man Ray) while others (e.g. Eugène Atget) were closer to realist paradigms.[3] In some of the so-called 'iconic' images of later decades, such as Nick Ut's 'Accidental Napalm', the compositional effects and aesthetics were important to finding audience reception (Hariman and Lucaites, 2007: 171–207). However, while photographs under certain circumstances help alert the public to 'the truth of what is happening', the idea of 'utter truth' confuses possible levels of knowing (Berger, 2013: 70–71).

In some circles social realism became suspect and photographic movements such as the Bauhaus-influenced *Neues Sehen* (New Vision) followed conventions of abstraction (Edwards, 2006: 57 ff.), problematizing the idea of the representation of the 'real'. Even during the heyday of documentary realism, photography's innocence was challenged, for example by Siegfried Kracauer's opposition to the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, which he criticized as having a naive epistemology of 'documentary illusion' since, '[t]he truth content of the original is left behind in its history; the photograph captures only the residuum that history has discharged' (Kracauer, 1995: 55). This is compounded by overloading, since '[n]ever before has an age been so informed about itself . . . [but] [t]he assault of this mass of images is so powerful that it threatens to destroy the potentially existing awareness of crucial traits' (Kracauer, 1995: 58). Indeed, he said, photos 'gobble up the world', creating a memoryless eternal present in which the photo captures a fleeting moment in a way 'reminiscent of the state of dreaming [*Zustand des Träumens*] in which fragments

of experience of the day confuse' (Kracauer, 1927).[4] Not dissimilarly, for Italian Futurists, such as Anton Guillo Bragagila, the photograph appeared as a 'pacification of life' that 'arbitrarily stopped time as an immobile representation of something that no longer is' (Lista, 2001: 22).

Ambivalence and 'ontological uncertainty', as Michael Roth put it, arose further from this tension linked to the way in which the indexical nature changes in relation to images (Roth, 2009). On the one had there is the idea of the photograph as representing 'how it actually was', as Walter Michaels says, a 'certificate of presence' offering the impression of 'touching the past'. Yet the photograph is not a 'fossil' (that is, a trace and record of the past) but an 'intentionally produced object' (Michaels, 2007: 445). Roth argues further that the desire for presence cannot be gratified because perception is 'always invaded by memory' and the 'photograph points to and accentuates this ambivalence' (Roth, 2009). Again, Douglas Nickel argues 'time is not a thing' and 'cannot be frozen' but we rather impute time to the photograph by interpreting tokens of its passage' (Nickel, 2017). The photograph is then, according to this view of its ambivalence, the site of a complex cultural and historical conjuncture that replicates many cultural meanings.

By contrast though, for Walter Benjamin the photograph's very 'freezing of time' can become a 'revelatory moment' (Hamilakis et al., 2009: 290), making its 'situatedness' and 'nowness' both an inevitable and positive feature, as a commemoration that enables perception and memory. Similarly, for Barthes, photography is a 'transparent envelope' through which one can feel oneself to be in a prior time. 'The type of consciousness the photograph involves is indeed truly unprecedented, since it establishes not a consciousness of the being-there of the thing . . . but an awareness of its having-been-there' and this could never be repeated existentially but permits 'that rather terrible thing . . . the return of the dead' (Barthes, 2000: 44). This is not so much a political as an affective relationship though, since the punctum that pricks us is phenomenal and personal. The photograph also 'has something tautological about it: a pipe, here, is always and intractably a pipe . . . [it] always carries its referent with itself' which suggests that the referent is not external to the image (Barthes, 2000: 5).

Let us look at these controversies in the context of sociological understandings of cultural modernity, particularly through the lens (so to speak) of Simmel's sociology of the visual. This begins by situating the photograph in the process of shock and unintelligibility of the city as represented in sociological and cultural responses to it. Simmel's theory of social forms and aestheticization will be used to support the claim that the image is a product of a process of social formation, that acquires a kind of autonomy, as Adorno claimed, 'Art takes on its own autonomous life beyond its maker . . . To make things of which we do not know what they are' (Adorno, 1984: 114).

Urban Crisis Of Legibility – Simmel, Social Types and the Visual

Photography and sociology both explored the metropolis and '[b]y the end of the nineteenth century,' says Peter Fritzsch, 'Berlin provided a most congenial geography for modernism's fugitive forms' (Fritzsch, 1994). This is reflected in Simmel's classic essay on the metropolis, described as an 'ultimate statement' and 'ur-text for modernist

studies' (Bistis, 2005). Simmel's formulations stand at an important sociological juncture. If '[t]he city is not a spatial entity with sociological consequences but a sociological entity that is formed spatially' (Simmel, 1997: 11), then space is filled by sociation which can be visualized. Photography has a distinctive relationship with the urban scene and the modern metropolis was photography's initial cultural location, although it also had an 'anthropological', colonizing gaze.[5] Indeed, underlying both was a kind of double colonizing: on one hand the imperializing and othering gaze of travelogues (Moser, 2017) and, on the other, urban explorers like Riis discovering 'exotic' migrants in New York (see Carrabine, 2012). In a Franco-German neologism, Benjamin wrote of the *Chockerlebnis*, the shock-experience of modernity where we are jostled by street crowds, the jolt of the machine and mechanized labour (Benjamin, 2003: 318). The money economy's establishment of universal equivalence and exchangeability had enshrined an objective culture of impersonality that encroached on subjective life. Simmel portrayed this in terms of an overloading of visual stimulation provoking detachment and a blasé attitude, or what Paul Westheim, editor of *Das Kunstblatt*, called 'image-weariness' (*bildermüde*) (Westheim, 1932: 20–22).

However, modern life is in continual tension between individuation (saying 'I' to oneself) and being drawn into external forms (Simmel, 1997: 77) the latter generating a 'visual economy of repetition' (Shinkle, 2004). The latter generated new representations of social relationships, illustrated for example by the family album, which Philip Stokes says is on the one hand 'intensely boring', but on the other is 'one of the more complicated areas of photographic representation' (Stokes, 1992: 194). These offer a play of individuality against collectivity, hierarchies, rivalries, marking solidarities and mapping 'forms of the person' (Stokes, 1992: 176–177) and as Sandbye (2014) suggests they create history and make feelings emerge that might otherwise not be articulated. However, beyond the realms of intimate relationships, anonymity and impersonality created a consequent 'crisis of intelligibility', since 'what cannot be read threatens' and this uncertainty called forth new forms of 'reading', as Robert Ray (1997) suggests. The search for recognition in the metropolis had several manifestations. In literature, for example in EA Poe's *The Man of the Crowd* (2015; first published in 1840), an unnamed (hence anonymous) narrator 'reads' people passing by a coffeehouse window and becomes fascinated by an unintelligible man whom he follows until exhausted, when he concludes that he is a 'type and genius of deep crime' because of his inscrutability.

The problem of unintelligibility is also illustrated in the popular books on 'physiognomies' (Henning, 2018: 110) that constructed social types intended to make urban life more legible, to classify and stereotype strangers. Genia Katz (2015) sees these as a response to the city's perpetual transformation in which the cultural imagination is more and more difficult to decipher, creating the need for inhabitants to 'penetrate the mysteries of the urban space' and, as Benjamin suggested, were intended primarily to provide a simplified and reassuring image of urban reality. These were also a means of quickly assessing the character of strangers in the dangerous and congested spaces of the 19th-century city (Sekula, 1986). Edging closer to the photographic, Hans Ostwald's *Großstadt-Dokumente* of Berlin in the early 20th century has been described as having 'photographic accuracy' (Huber, 2005) while his preoccupation with marginality finds echoes in Simmel's portraits, such as the 'Vagabond'.[6] This style is not so removed from

that of photographers revealing the underside of the urban scene, such as Brassaï (Gyula Halász) who stalked Paris, his images featuring night transport, graffiti, lamplighters, dating couples and sex workers.[7] Again, Weegee (Aurthur Fellig) was a voyeur of extremes working in New York City's Lower East Side in the 1930s and 1940s who followed the city's emergency services, depicting realistic scenes of urban life, crime, injury and murder victims, muggers, traffic accidents.[8]

Simmel's sociological style is often compared with Baudelaire's *flâneur*, at one with the novelist, photographer or essayist naturalistically but also voyeuristically recording city scenes. However, although the visual is important for Simmel, he understood the city as a sensory experience in which the object is made real by appearing to different senses (Pyyhtinen, 2010). The 'interpersonal relationships of people in big cities are characterised by a markedly greater emphasis on the use of the eyes than of the ears' (Simmel, 1997: 111), but this does not mean that the eye is the mirror of reality since framing and selecting are unavoidable. Indeed, Simmel's social form was a conceptual device for capturing stylized everyday processes of becoming, in which nothing is trivial since within each passing encounter we find the details of the totality of its meaning, like Kracauer's claim that the historical process is determined 'in the analysis of the insignificant' (Frisby, 2013: 6). For Simmel, the eye performed 'unique sociological service' and mutual gaze was 'the purest reciprocal relationship' (Simmel, 1997: 111). The social knowledge gained immediately in the glance requires full engagement in interaction and openness of the self to the other's vision. Every act of looking entails at least the expectation of meaning even if this is not necessarily fulfilled; yet the face is not easily read, may or may not be revealing, and requires interpretation, as with any pictorial representation. Moreover, sociability, as de la Fuente notes, 'enters into a relation to external existence parallel to the work or art and its relationship to reality' (2008: 348).

Here we see a potential source of the ambivalence around permanence and fleetingness in the image, since like Simmel's forms, the photograph is an abstraction from the formless flow of the lifeforce (*Lebenskraft*) which '[l]eft to itself . . . streams on without interruption; its restless rhythm opposes the fixed duration of any particular forms (*Gestaltungen*)'. Since we inevitably treat others 'as if' they were members of a larger type or class and 'are all fragments of the type we are', the other appears as a distortion. There is necessarily a process of *Ergänzung*, of supplementing, so that in 'the picture that one human gets of another', fragments (like character traits and motivations) 'are formed into a whole by alter's mental eye . . . of something that we never are wholly' (Simmel, 1971: 356). This is always unstable though, so '[e]ach cultural form, once it is created, is gnawed at varying rates by the forces of life. As soon as one is fully developed, the next begins to form; after a struggle that may be long or short, it will inevitably succeed its predecessor' (Simmel, 1971: 376). Photographic movements attempted to break free from the freezing of this flow – for example, Italian Futurism echoed Simmel in invoking the ideas of Bergson's lifeforce and Spencer's principle of differentiation. Moholy-Nagy saw photography, film and light as potentially making visible modernity's challenge to habits of seeing by transforming spatial experience (Tóth, 2015). This was about the juxtaposition of time, the capturing of movement and change, against freezing images.

Seen in this way, Simmel's social vignettes, such as the Pauper, the Miser, the Spendthrift, and most famously the Stranger, were like the physiognomies, attempts to

render more visible the experience of inscrutability, and regain a grasp of a world in flux. Simmel's Stranger is within but also outside of their society, a spatial position that offers insights otherwise unavailable. The sociology of the glance (*der Blick*) reveals social structures in a fleeting moment, but the gaze is more than a *look* – it is a reflection of those structures that photographers expose (Clarke, 1997: 146). The glance is ephemeral and fleeting but the photo fixes the glance, rendering it at once constructed and like social forms, a crystallization of interactions in time and space. Although social types are described as 'snapshots' (*Schnappschuß*), the gaze fixes the glance in the portrait that has been carefully constructed and is actually more of a *Momentbild*, with layers of light, shadow and colour intensified into atmospheric, momentary images, sometimes verging towards abstraction.

The photograph, like the look, however, is visual but not *transparent*. The dominance of the money economy, as Marx's 'bewitched and distorted world' (Marx, 2016: 894) was the epitome of objective culture that increasingly eroded subjectivities. Indeed, the photograph aims to reveal more than is immediately visible, as with Benjamin's 'optical unconscious', where '[i]t is another nature that speaks to the camera rather than to the eye: "other" above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious' (Benjamin, 2015: 91). The photograph could reveal 'nearly invisible phenomena' of repressed optical experience and the image, like the phantasmagoria of capitalism, bypassed the conscious mind and appealed to the unconscious. Thus, it was not so much photography's indexical relationship to material reality that was crucial but rather its proximity to fantasy and psychic structures of the imagination (Smith and Sliwinski, 2017: 9). The aesthetic of landscape for example, does not inhere in 'nature' but in the formal categories through which it is constructed (Simmel, 2007). Photography then conforms to the genre of a 'mood-image' (*Stimmungsbild*) which alludes to an emotional atmosphere rather than providing a realistic or critical depiction (Buck-Morss, 1992). Intelligibility had morphed into stylistic forms.

Simmel (1958) argued that the artistic image was autonomous from utility, and the photographic image can be seen similarly, despite claims to realism and naturalism. Art's depiction of spatial organization differs from 'real experience' in that the former constitutes a self-sufficient unity beyond reality and utility, from which an art form is detached. *Neues Sehen* involved techniques such as unexpected framings, plays with contrast in form and light, the use of high and low camera angles. Though sharing with *Neue Sachlichkeit* a realist aesthetic, the movement favoured experimentation and the use of technical means in photographic expression, defamiliarization of urban and rural scenes.[9] The fluidity and fleetingness of the world, the experience of fragmentation, speed, traces, time lapse was represented by increasing abstraction, in photographers such as Alfred Stieglitz, Moholy-Nagy, Man Ray. This transition from realism to abstraction, transparency and indexicality to illusion, contrasted with the realism of socially engaged photographers, but this was not necessarily a renunciation of engagement. Simmel (in for example his essay on Rodin – Simmel, 1980) anticipated in some ways Adorno's aesthetic theory that art that refuses instrumental rationality renders the world visible by casting it in a different light – one pointing through the aesthetic experience to a radically other world. As Adorno put it, 'art criticises society by just being there' since to lose

oneself in great works of art is to experience the 'discomfiture, more precisely a tremor' of discovery that the truth embodied in the aesthetic has real possibilities (Adorno, 1984: 346–347). For both Simmel and Adorno though, this is not a passive process but rather requires the creative activity of the beholder to bring the form to fruition, even if for Simmel this was more a psychological process than one involving public social interaction (Cronan, 2009).[10] He says, while the claim

> that the enjoyer (*der Genießende*) repeats in himself the process of creation has some truth – this cannot be done more energetically than by the imagination having to complete the incomplete itself and push its productive movement between the work and its end effect in us. (Simmel, 1902)

Constructivism and photodynamism were responses to the shock and unintelligibility of the city while also announcing the impossibility of fixed meaning in photo artworks that were mobile, decontextualized, polysemous and performative. These responses took various forms. The Austrian photographer Heinrich Kühn conceived of the aesthetic as an antithesis to the violence of the city and of art photography as a relaxant to calm the modern subject's over-agitated sensory systems. His experiments with blur and his pursuit of aesthetic autonomy were offered as liberation from the assaults of visual culture and its ongoing demands on our eyes (Koepnick, 2011). Somewhat by contrast, Moholy-Nagy's Bauhaus Constructivism strove to challenge the literal world of surface appearances, the rheme, and use the camera to reveal what is not immediately visible. Moholy-Nagy saw constructivist art as 'organizational' where constructivism overrides the subjective while also containing the utopian promise to improve human subjects (Tsai, 2018). In constructivist photos there is a weave of time and space emancipated from the world of mere appearances (Dant and Gillock, 2002) that aims to both familiarize and defamiliarize. For example, in Moholy-Nagy's 'Berlin Radio Tower' (Figure 1), itself a symbol of new communication media, there is a play of angles, light and dark, structure and shadow, and geometric lines of café tables below. The camera angle conveys weightlessness, the dematerializing of architecture, and suggests an ability to become antigravitational, floating above the city. This was a celebration of modern, technologically mediated vision to break ingrained habits of seeing but which was also mimetic of the movement of the machine in the imaginary of the image.

Taking these tendencies further, Futurist 'photodynamism' (in some ways drawing on Moholy-Nagy) also attempted to represent the shock of movement in the city while transcending photography's freezing in time. Futurist photographers regarded the image as a petrification and negation of sensation, arbitrarily stopping time as an immobile representation. Mario Bellusi's project was a transcendental photography of movement, the rejection of museums and art as 'communication' to show the sudden gesture not continuous movement, using photomontage to create images of urgency and movement – such as 'Modern Traffic in Ancient Rome' (1930. See Figure 2). This is described as a 'visual vertigo' that rejects the photographic reproduction of things (Lista, 2001: 27). It creates a 'photoscene' through photomontage, overlaying multiple images to create a sense of movement with no focal point, and which neither conforms to nor endorses the appearances of the world. This image of photographic fragments attempts to debunk the idea of
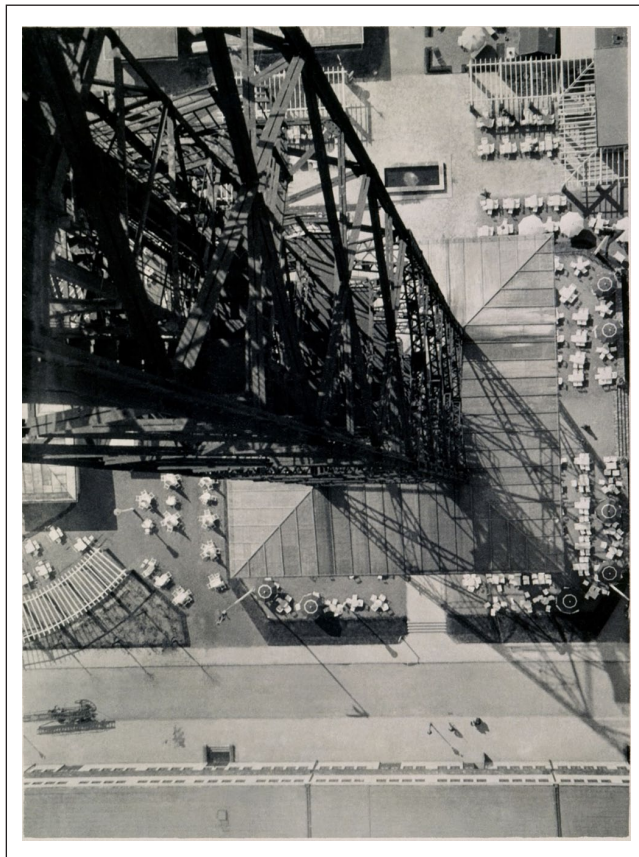
Figure 1. 'Berlin Radio Tower' (1928) by László Moholy-Nagy, Courtesy of the Estate of László Moholy-Nagy.

'Rome the Eternal City' and show instead the streets submerged in traffic, thus demanding both that the photograph remain 'faithful' to the real while also transcending it.

Critical Aesthetics, Engaged Photography – Realism and Formalism

The discussion now examines the work of constituting visuality within the aesthetics of social forms and aims to illustrate the ambiguous autonomy of the visual form. However, while Simmel's aesthetic was about beauty and play, practical being transformed into aesthetic stylization, critical imagery might become the 'site of a terrain for *us* to make things visible' (Hellings, 2014: 4). Eamonn Carrabine notes in relation to photographs of atrocity and injustice, that 'human misery should not be reduced to a set of aesthetic concerns, but is fundamentally bound up with the politics of testimony and memory'

Figure 2. 'Moderner Verkehr im alten Rom' (1930) by Mario Bellusi (Modern Traffic in Ancient Rome) silver print 154×202 mm. Mart, Archivio del '900, Fondo Somenzi. Catalogue number: Som.VI.11.18.

(Carrabine, 2012). The aesthetic is then a terrain through which meaning and judgement are contested and constructed, so that art is distinct from life but reveals its deeper layers. The photograph is not simply a 'trace' or a copy but a social form embedded in cultural modernity's shock and movement. Cultural modernity entailed increasing symbolization and abstraction, towards universalizing sameness, emptiness and anonymity, as opposed to individualization and differentiation. The visibility/invisibility of the metropolis is manifest in both socially-committed documentary photography with an aesthetic of shock (Dant and Gillock, 2002), and abstract styles of detachment and lines of shape and colour. While there was a fierce conflict between the abstract formalism of *Neues Sehen* and political social realism, both implied a utopian vision and echoed modernist cultural dilemmas. This section will explore these issues through the inter-war workers' photographic movement and the work of Edith Tudor Hart, who though more realist than new vision, aimed to challenge the way the world is perceived and embodied an aesthetic that transcended utility.

There were intertwined political and aesthetic movements with layers of labour and contestation involved in the reading of the image, and critical realism in photography was a style of resistance to the blasé response to the overloading of stimulus. In this too though, there was a tension between 'straight photography' and critique, in that the former was criticized as celebrating capitalist modernity by simply reproducing it, as in Bertolt Brecht's poem, with *Neue Sachlichkeit* in mind, '700 Intellectuals Worship an Oil

Tank'.[11] In socially committed photography too though, tensions arose around celebration of modernity, nostalgic escape into nature, and realism vs. constructivist abstraction.

Socialist photographic movements aimed to place social conditions under the 'hard merciless light' as Ribalta (2011) describes it, of legibility, but while affecting practical political purpose, image-production also entailed aesthetic formation. The distinction between rigorous objectivity and constructivist vision then was less clear than is often suggested. Technological advances and enhanced capacities facilitated new socialist and communist photo journals, and wider availability of cameras meant that a working-class hobby could become a weapon. However, socialist photography also strove to an autonomous social form defining its own aesthetic. The *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung*[12] claimed the camera was an 'objective observer', but worker-contributors were expected to have a 'trained eye' to understand complexities of their material (Stumberger, 2001). Similarly, the Austrian Social Democratic magazine *Der Kuckuck*, launched to celebrate 'Red Vienna' and printing 50,000 copies weekly, combated the ideology of idyllic genre pictures and captivating landscapes with documentary lives of the metropolis (Tsai, 2005).[13] The journal attempted to collaborate with its audience and held photographic contests to 'reflect human life in all its manifestations', introducing a contest for 'worker's photography' (*Arbeiterphotographie*). However, it was the task of the magazine editors to set the terms of participation, and they regarded the workers as in need of training in photographic techniques. Siegfried Weyr, the editor of *Der Kuckuck*, writing in *Der Jugendliche Arbeiter* (1931), argued that workers' photography as a weapon (*Kampfmittel*) had 'not yet been realised'. Political photography is still 'almost not at all operating' and, actually critical of social realism, 'social photo reportage has exhausted itself in shots of crippled beggars or miserable wretches searching rubbish bins'. In relation to three photographs depicting different forms of the dignity of labour (men shovelling earth into a cart, men and women working on ship and a man at a lathe) he says that these are 'technically quite successful', and one, is beautiful in showing 'strong workers, in front of us in the play of sun rays, coping with the clods.' However, they look 'posed' (*gemacht*). The political photograph, he continued, is a social concept fusing images with ideas (*Bilder und Ideen*) and through class struggle, the working-class photographer already has his object. This strategy aimed to construct a new visual aesthetic from lived subjective experience while, as Satterthwaite (2019) finds in Weimar photomontages, invoking a mythic narrative of the modern individual who is at home in both the natural world and machine age. *Der Kuckuck*'s stylistic sensibility included blurry landscapes, abstract and iconic, impressionistic images in the manner of *Neues Sehen*. A photo ('Halt!') showing a rectilinear railway signal and gantry dominant in the foreground, against a background of snow-covered rail tracks and grey buildings, is described as not only technically good but also 'holds in itself the whole charm of the railway industry in spite of trouble and danger for today's workers who are indispensable to it'. 'Realism' then must be constructed, requires insertion in the relevant discourse where they are subject to semiotic contestation, meaning-making and power.

The Social Realism of Edith Tudor Hart

Realist materialism is ambivalently embroiled with aesthetic social forms. The photography of Edith Tudor Hart (née Suschitzky, 1908–1973) was influenced both by Bauhaus and the Austrian worker-photographic schools, and informed by a realist aesthetic and politics of class, exile and gender. A Communist Party activist (and sometime agent for the intelligence agency of the Soviet Union, the NKVD[14]), her work exemplifies the political programme of social realist photography. She was (what would now be called) a street photographer of the poor and excluded in the metropolis, and women (and children) frequently featured – of the 112 images in the Vienna exhibition catalogue, *Shadow of Tyranny*, over a half depict (mostly working-class) women. Duncan Forbes sees in her work a 'grasp, perhaps more intuitive than theoretical, of the conditions of photographic realism' (Forbes, 2013a: 68). This echoes Barthes, perhaps, that the aesthetic image also affords encounters not intended, controlled or even acknowledged by the photographer themselves. 'The ignition of this aesthetic affordance is always already present in the things depicted—and brought forward not necessarily because the photographer intended to do so but because of the photograph's indiscriminating attentiveness to the surface of things' (Barthes, 2000: 49–55). Forbes further sees a social realism in her work that later became 'subjectified and mythologized' in its rediscovery in the 1970s and 1980s when it was removed from her critique and was placed within a nostalgic and voyeuristic treatment of class relations. (Forbes, 2013b: 144). However, the mix of realism and aesthetics in her work illustrates a more complex constitution of the process of composition.

In Dessau she was briefly at the Bauhaus school and published in *Der Kuckuck*, before her exile in the UK in 1933 (Jungk, 2015). There she became a professional photojournalist whose work was commissioned in publications such as *The Listener* and *Picture Post*.[15] Suschitzky's time at the Bauhaus was important politically and aesthetically and although she advanced an ethic of 'revolutionary functionalism' (Holzer, 2013) her photography exemplifies mixed aesthetics. Her social realism aimed to demonstrate antagonisms of class using techniques such as chiaroscuro, in which the figure-ground motif (also favoured by Simmel) contrasts with a background pattern, creating both distance and proximity (Davis, 1973). In her 'Gee Street' (Figure 3), the dramatic squalor of the scene is greatly emphasized by the unusual angle from which the picture has been taken, which affords a steep aerial vantage point. The scene is accentuated by the diagonal design, especially that from top left to bottom right which divides the photo into dark and light – the play of dark walls of the adjacent building against the texture and light of washing hanging and the illuminated child looking up at the camera. There is the part diagonal from the upper left to centre of the image dividing the rough brickwork from the human subjects, so that the eye is drawn to them along the lines of light, while evoking a sense of imprisonment within the walls that dominate the photo.

Holzer (2013) suggests that the angle of view in Gee Street was a matter of 'convenience' and that while Tudor Hart's realist aesthetic followed 'experiments with *Neues Sehen*' this kind of 'formal gimmickry' does not play a role in her documentary work. But this perspective appears in other Tudor-Hart photos, such as Oxford Street (1936) and Miner's Cottages (1936), which suggests it is more of a lasting device. Her early photo of the Vienna Prater Ferris Wheel (1931) that appeared on the front cover of *The*
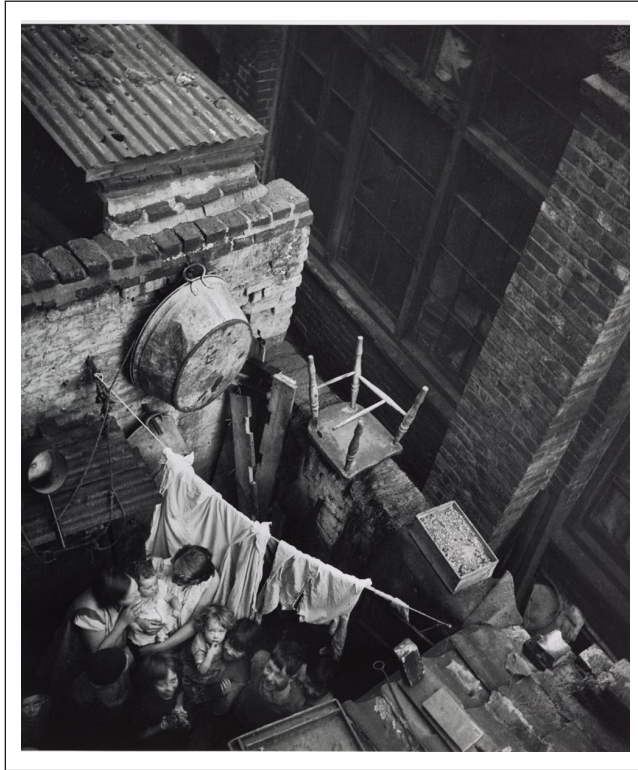
Figure 3. 'Gee Street', Finsbury, London, by Edith Tudor Hart. Silver gelatine print from archival negative. National Galleries of Scotland. Archive presented by Wolfgang Suschitzky 2004. © Copyright held jointly by Peter Suschitzky, Julia Donat and Misha Donat.

Listener on 16 May 1934[16] reflects Bauhaus style – taken from a high angle, lines of the structure and mechanism divide the scene below into segments – people, cafes, white and dark, tables and light, similar to Moholny-Nagy's 'Berlin Radio Tower' or Tim Gidal's Pont Transbordeur, Marseille (1930).[17] As with both of these, the camera is pointed vertically downwards and the image is dominated by iron struts suggesting the domination of structure and metal over humans. 'Gee Street' was often juxtaposed to her image of the 'Poodle Parlour' (Figure 4), featuring the indulgence of pets by the wealthy. The overt message is clear – an indictment of the lavish comfort of pets of the rich contrasted with squalid slum housing – but the photos reveal subtle differences. In 'Poodle Parlour' the figures turn away from the camera, precluding reciprocity, although it is also a photo of working women. It is the dog (actually not a poodle but a British Bulldog, perhaps symbolizing the ruling class) that is the focal point of the image. In 'Gee Street', which is almost certainly posed, the faces of children are upturned hopefully, while adults are looking downwards towards the baby. For Tudor Hart, children represented a utopian subversive potential of socialization through self-government and mutual discovery – a

Figure 4. 'Poodle Parlour', London by Edith Tudor Hart. Silver gelatine print from archival negative National Galleries of Scotland. Archive presented by Wolfgang Suschitzky 2004. © Copyright held jointly by Peter Suschitzky, Julia Donat and Misha Donat.

society at odds with competitive egoism (Forbes, 2011). Gee Street was published (as 'London Backyard') in the widely selling 1939 Odham's Press collection of *The World's Best Photographs* and the commentary was a powerful statement of social realist photography:

> Such photographs are social documents which it is impossible not to read. They make us aware of the world around us and what is right and wrong with it, whether we like it or not. If it has done nothing else, the camera has made the pleading of ignorance – the ostrich-like burying of our heads in the sands of illusion – a very thin excuse (1939: 19).

This suggests that the photo is a transparent index, and, as Azoulay puts it, 'magically speaks to us' (Azoulay, 2012: 25) but actually, it not only requires a spectator and critical public (Hariman and Lucaites, 2006 and 2017) but also a performative spectator who looks at and through the image. This seeing, as suggested earlier, is embedded in the visual culture of the metropolis and participates in visual techniques and aesthetics of recognition, and it is the capacity of the visual imagination to 'see' what the image might reveal.

Tudor Hart's 'Caledonian Market' (Figure 5), which was first published in *Der Kuckuck*, is one of several she took there. This market, by contrast with many others, was colourless and devoid of romance. It epitomized the bleakness of London's working-class districts, the oppression of working-class women, the unemployed, and eccentric figures in a 'malodorous world'. The image poses not as poetic but as documentary; however, it raises questions about what we are viewing. There appears to be an argument. Is that anger or just an

Figure 5. 'Caledonian Market' by Edith Tudor Hart. Silver gelatine print from archival negative. National Galleries of Scotland. Archive presented by Wolfgang Suschitzky 2004. © Copyright held jointly by Peter Suschitzky, Julia Donat and Misha Donat.

odd expression caught in the middle of a lively exchange? The girl looks worried though. There's a sense of occasion from how people are dressed. It looks like a mirror initially but the woman is looking into the next section of the space. The woman and man have eye contact but the girl looks away. What is her relationship to either of them? The woman has her arm through the girl's – a grandmother perhaps?[18] There is a woman spectator who is wearing dark glasses, but spectating whom- the scene, the photographer or the viewer? Is this a matter of style or is she actually a spectator, since it was common for unsighted people to wear dark glasses? The foreground is out of focus and blurred, which is itself a New Vision technique, but is this intentional and if so, what does it convey? These questions are not answered; however, the image is not 'functional' but rather draws us in to make the scene intelligible. The image positions the viewer at table height, as a participant or voyeur, while the focus on the background accentuates the spatial relationships between the three figures in the centre, defining a narrative plane. This incidentally illustrates Simmel's conception of the significance of even the most commonplace activities and their contribution to the emergence of cultural forms, and the unity of nearness and remoteness in every human relationship. In these photographs the visibility of the metropolis is multi-layered and mediated by the semiotic work of contestation and interaction.

Conclusions

The debate over realism and constructivism is long-standing and it is suggested here that Simmel's sociology of the visual, though seldom referred to, is a powerful means of

linking social theory to exploration of the ambivalence of the image. The development of sociology and photography in the period under discussion, in some important ways mirrored each other and reflected ambivalences of cultural modernism. It has been suggested that aesthetic photographic practices were embedded in issues of intelligibility, urban shock, rapid movement and social distance. This situates the debates around the veracity of the photograph in a wider social context since photography was a self-referential social form, in Simmel's sense, defined by its aesthetic criteria of application and social formation. It does not then have 'revelatory truth' but rather invites the viewer into an imaginary visual relationship with the world. No mirror of the object, as some had hoped, no more than is sociology, but rather a stylized, framed representation fixed in time, even if this evokes a sense of 'having-been-there'. However, this presence, the temporal-freeze quality of the photo, was challenged on several counts. On grounds of representation, *Neues Sehen* attempted to capture movement and temporality, for example, through techniques such as multiple images and photomontage, or through the light of inner experience of modernity through the underside of the surface of the visible world. While with the New Objectivity the referent object was accorded priority, the pure visuality of the New Vision dematerialized the object, which circulated through the aesthetic social form of the photographic. A further challenge to temporal fixing was apparent in critical social realism, for example in workers' photography, whereby representation of the real was embedded in a utopian temporality – the implicit critique in the image presaged a better society of the future. Interpretive meaning was then derived not from a point in the past but from the future. In the very stylistic formal composition of Edith Tudor Hart's images there is an allusion to the possibility of an alternative, saner world reaching beyond simple visual depiction and rendering her subjects visible in a way that evokes solidarity. Workers' photography demanded realism but mediated through aesthetic forms, which would connote more than was immediately visible. They sought images constructed according to formal aesthetic principles that eschewed naïve realism and reflected the ambivalences of cultural modernity of visible–invisible, blasé–engaged, utilitarian–playful, subjective–objective. The photograph involves an uncertain mixture of 'the real' in a loose iconic-indexical sense, coded convention, and the performative. The power of the photograph as document then rests not in its 'objectivity' but in the relationship between referential signs and social-aesthetic forms. Photography is in a position to reduce or contain the 'quotation from reality' (to use Berger's phrase). Thus it 'presents', 'represents' and 'performs' in varying mixtures, is more rhetorical than indexical, but its meanings crucially require interpretative semiotic work and are the outcomes of contestation.

    The discussion here has explored these issues with reference to examples of inter-war photography. Edith Tudor Hart's work is particularly important here in that it represents the realist genre of street photography, that is, of candid, unrehearsed pictures of everyday life. These generate snapshots of interactions, such as the Caledonian Market, that offer intriguing narrative potential. These further draw on the ambiguity of the image, its construction of its subject, and the meanings that derive from its aesthetic form. The wider implications of this for visual sociology are that one should not assume the image has a realist status as 'evidence' but is rather an imaginative and aesthetic construct produced through the media of form, light and composition. Thus, the social realist cult of

coldness belied both its aesthetic and the utopian criticism implied in images of inequity and poverty. The ambiguity of the photograph can be read as capturing Simmel's unavoidable ambiguity of social life, into which it potentially offers rich insights. Indexicality is a complex multi-referential process to be understood hermeneutically.

Notes

1. Following the distinction made by Gillian Rose (2014), this discussion is not an account of the visual, in the sense used in visual research methods, but of how the social renders visuality a mode of cultural construction of experience. It is further limited to lens-based work rather than other opticless modes of image capture, such as animation, digital collage, pinhole photography, pictograms, computational photography and scanography.
2. Influenced particularly by the experience of the First World War, The New Objectivity (also called 'Straight Photography') was 'to see things the way they are' (Otto Dix) and advanced realism in defiance of trends towards abstraction and the subjectivity of early German Expressionists (Fox, 2006). *Sachlichkeit* is not so much 'objectivity' as 'thingy-ness' invoking a materiality beyond literal reproduction, such as Renger-Patzsch's industrial images.
3. Nonetheless, the 'documentary' photography of Atget sometimes brought the surreal out of the real while remaining indexical, such as 'Men's Fashions' (1925) with multiple reflections in a Paris men's clothing shop window.
4. Kracauer saw in film two tendencies – 'realistic' (as in the Lumière brothers) and the 'formative' (as in Méliès).
5. Lombroso's positivistic 'criminal anthropology' was based on an atlas of photograph-based engravings, as well as anthropometric investigations (Tagg, 1988). The prisons and police took up 'identification' photography as a way of keeping records. This involves a different kind of social control than that of 'power-knowledge'.
6. Ostwald has been described as 'the literary *flâneur* whom Walter Benjamin looked for in turn-of-the-century Berlin but never found' (Fritzsche, 1994).
7. See for example http://www.artnet.com/artists/brassa%C3%AF/ (accessed 20 April 2020)
8. See for example https://www.theguardian.com/cities/gallery/2015/mar/31/the-best-of-weegees-new-york-street-photography-in-pictures (accessed 21 March 2020).
9. Despite their different aesthetics the two movements could coexist as for example in Bauhaus photography. Lucia Moholy's photography of Bauhaus utensils and furniture gave the object

priority in line with the New Objectivity, by contrast with Moholy-Nagy's New Vision constructivism. (Schuldenfrei, 2013).

10. Linking Simmel and Adorno is not fanciful but reflects a theme that runs through Lukács and Bloch since, like them, Simmel hoped that art, as a mode of non-conceptual insight offering snapshots of reality, might resist reification (Fuchs, 1991) and the overwhelming of representations prompting a blasé attitude.

11. For example, 'Du Häßlicher/Du bist der Schönste/Tue uns Gewalt an/Du Sachlicher!' ('You ugly/You are the most beautiful/Do us violence/You factual') (Knopf, 2001: 144–146).

12. German Communist-supporting photo magazine published between 1924 and 1933 in Germany and then until 1938 in Paris.

13. Founded in 1929 and affiliated with the Austrian Social Democratic Party, *Der Kuckuck* was modelled in content and format on mainstream boulevard weeklies, but directed specifically at a working-class public. It ceased publication when it was banned by the Austrian fascist regime in 1934.

14. Her connection to the Cambridge Spies (especially Kim Philby) has attracted much attention, especially from Jungk (2015) but the focus here is on her photography.

15. She was involved with the CPGB's Workers' Film and Photo League but unlike the German and Austrian journals, this was short-lived. The idea of a British worker photography movement is largely a creation of the 1970s under the influence of new radicalism following Paris 1968 (Forbes, 2011: 206).

16. See https://www.nationalgalleries.org/sites/default/files/styles/ngs-default/public/externals/46404.jpg?itok=UJBlVz2k (accessed 21 March 2020).

17. See https://www.1stdibs.com/art/photography/black-white-photography/tim-gidal-pont-transbordeur-marseille/id-a_2632013/ (accessed 21 March 2020). Gidal (1909–1996) was one of the founders of German photojournalism.

18. I am very grateful for Dawn Lyon's observations on this photograph.

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