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Agriculture, Industry, and the Birth of the Photo-Essay in the Late Weimar Republic

MICHAEL JENNINGS

Among the most sinister phenomena in intellectual history is the avoidance of the concrete. . . . But the situation of mankind today, as we all know, is so serious that we have to turn to what is closest and most concrete. We don't even have an inkling of how much time is left for us to focus on the most painful things. And yet, it could well be that our fate is contingent on certain hard knowledge that we do not yet have.

—Elias Canetti, *The Conscience of Words*

In the period between late 1928 and early 1930 a new genre emerged in Germany: the photo-essay. Not one but several books of photographs for the first time offered arguments based not on an interplay between text and image, but on photographs alone, arranged in discursive and often polemical order. Book-length photographic collections had of course been produced starting soon after the invention of photography in 1839, but these had, almost without exception, taken the form of compendia of photographs illustrating a text.¹ The emergence of the photograph as the preferred mode of illustration in the modern mass media—a

1. These were collections of city photographs showing daily life; travel volumes, often focusing on the “exotic” aspects of Egypt, or India, or the Bavarian village; architectural studies; and, as in the first such volume, Fox Talbot’s *The Pencil of Nature* (1844), presentations of the work of one photographer. Carol Armstrong’s groundbreaking *Scenes in a Library: Reading the Photograph in the Book 1843–1875* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998) is an important first step in the understanding of the role of photographs in these books. As she argues, the literature on photography has largely followed the lead of the museum in treating photographs in their singularity as discrete, auratic objects to be displayed—and read—in a way analogous to that accorded paintings (pp. 2–5).

process begun in the late nineteenth century—served as an important precondition for the gradual assumption of a primary signifying role by *sequences* of photographs. The illustrated newspapers in Germany soon began to feature what were essentially early forms of the photographic essay: series of photos accompanied by no or very little text, often explaining an aspect of modern life (the automobile race, rationalization in the factory, parliamentary debate). The notion of a discursive photo *book*, a work that presented a sequence of photographs as an argument—rather than around a theme or object—was thus a late development.² Given the widespread emphasis on photographic innovation in Germany in the 1920s—the prominent Weimar art historian Franz Roh spoke of two central moments in photography, the era of Daguerre and that of Weimar—it should perhaps come as no surprise that the photo-essay was first produced by a series of German photographers.³ This drive to innovation, coupled with the willingness of several major presses to publish books of photographs, produced what was essentially a new form.

In the last years of the Weimar Republic, and especially between 1928 and 1931, many of the most important photographers active in Germany published or contributed to photographic essay books. In what follows I examine the three most important of these volumes, Alfred Renger-Patzsch's *Die Welt ist schön* (The World Is Beautiful) of 1928, Franz Roh and Jan Tschichold's *Foto-Auge* (Photo-Eye), and August Sander's *Anlitz der Zeit* (Face of Our Time), both published in 1929.⁴ These books, the first polemically constructed photographic arguments in the history of the medium, arose from the complex discursive field that was the

2. It has still not established itself in the critical literature. No mention is made of the photo-essay as a subgenre in the major histories of photography by Newhall or Rosenblum, for example. The work of Alan Trachtenberg on the photographic book in the twentieth century stands as a single, impressive achievement that has found little echo. See Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1989).

3. Franz Roh, introduction to *Foto-Auge* (Stuttgart: Akademischer Verlag Dr. Fritz Wedekind, 1929), p. 3. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the German are my own. For a useful survey which situates the German "New Photography" in its European context, see Christopher Phillips, "Resurrecting Vision: European Photography between the World Wars" in Maria Morris Hamburg and Christopher Phillips, eds., *The New Vision: Photography between the World Wars* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989), pp. 65–108. Presentations that focus on Germany alone include David Mellor, ed., *Germany: The New Photography 1927–1933* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978), and Herbert Molderings, *Fotografie der Weimar Republic* (Berlin: Verlag Dirk Nishen, 1988).

4. Ian Jeffrey claims for Sander's work a place as the "first properly discursive photo-book in the history of the medium," a claim that misses Renger-Patzsch by a year and Roh/Tschichold by several months, and, most damagingly, reduces their work to a series of unrelated individual images. See Jeffrey, *Photography: A Concise History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 135.

Weimar Republic.⁵ The three photo-essays under consideration here reflect in increasingly astonishing ways on the coming demise of Germany's first democratic experiment; they do so through a complex interweaving of two key debates from the late 1920s, one on the relationship of nature and technology, the other on the proper role of photography in the life of a society.

Agriculture, Technology, and Destabilization in the Late Weimar Republic

Germany's rate of economic growth fell off suddenly and dramatically in the years 1928 and 1929; by the end of 1929 it had, in fact, plummeted to the low point reached before the stabilization of the economy that had occurred starting in 1924. By 1929, the stresses of the worldwide economic crisis had played themselves out in particularly destructive form in Germany. Among the many strands of events that, taken together, comprise the final economic crisis for the Weimar Republic, two assume a special power, both symbolic and real.

In November 1928, 220,000 metalworkers were locked out in the Ruhr region. This drastic action was the culmination of a long and bitter conflict between labor and industry in the Ruhr iron and steel sector. Industry, under increasing competitive pressure, had struggled mightily to escape from the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft*, the collective bargaining agreement hammered out in the early years of the Republic.⁶ This agreement, viewed initially as a cornerstone of the new constitution, had not only given labor significant powers of codetermination and negotiation; it had provided a firm basis for economic expansion. Now, eight years later, the leading forces in the iron and steel industry rejected binding arbitration by government, a key feature of the agreement. Instead, they initiated an open campaign of sabotage against the entire system of compulsory arbitration. When they followed these actions with the massive lockout, the workers found themselves in a highly unusual position: they enjoyed not only the support of the state apparatus, but that of all parties, from the bourgeois parties of the center on through the entire left-liberal and left.

At about the same time that the Ruhr dispute attracted the nation's attention, a parallel crisis in the agricultural sector evinced some similarities but

5. Herbert Molderings was the first to notice the generic similarity of these volumes; in a brief comment, he offered the rather tentative "photo book" as a designation. See Molderings, "Urbanism and Technological Utopianism," in Mellor, *The New Photography*, p. 88.

6. For an interpretation of the Ruhr crisis in the context of the idea of social partnership upon which the Weimar constitution was based, see Eberhard Kolb, *The Weimar Republic* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 78–81. Detlev Peukert, in his magisterial *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1993), examines the implications of the Ruhr crisis for the increasingly tenuous coalition governments in the last years of the Republic, pp. 126–27.

important differences. In this case, a worldwide agricultural price crisis in summer 1928 brought about a temporary collapse of the entire market. The large grain farms in the broad area east of the Elbe were hardest hit. While in the Ruhr resistance to state regulation had been organized by large metal concerns, east of the Elbe a series of spontaneous and isolated revolts against the government and the entire Weimar system was carried out by farmers and their largely conservative supporters.⁷

The simultaneity and parallelism of these crises—to say nothing of the attention accorded them in the national media—threw a long-simmering, never resolved debate into stark relief. During the *Gründerjahre*, the decades between 1870 and 1890 that followed upon the founding of the German Reich, the massive though belated industrialization of Germany was accompanied by very public debates pitting the social benefits attributed to urban industry against the communal virtues of life on the land; these debates were codified at the end of the century in Ferdinand Tönnies' differentiation of *Gesellschaft* (the modern urban society) and *Gemeinschaft* (the traditional rural collective).⁸ Even in the late 1920s, neither the evidence nor public opinion was decided on a key Weimar dilemma: whether Germany was to be an industrial or agricultural nation. Despite the contemporary view of the Weimar Republic as a society dominated by the political, economic, and especially cultural achievements of its cities, the majority of its citizens continued to live on the land, in villages and small towns.⁹ And despite the rapid modernization of the society following on the decimation of its industrial capacity in the years during and after World War I, it was still by no means clear to contemporaries that the German economy would be driven primarily by its industrial sector. In the late 1920s, the twinned economic crises precipitated this issue once again out of a more general Weimar discussion that ranged an agrarian romanticism and antiurbanism against the technological utopianism and the rise of the city for which Weimar is now much better known.¹⁰ And, in the late 1920s, these issues had a new urgency lent by the widespread recognition that Weimar's party

7. Peukert, pp. 120–24, attributes to the East Elban agricultural crisis a major role in the final economic collapse of Weimar. See also Jens Flemming, *Landwirtschaftliche Interessen und Demokratie* (Bonn: Verlag Neue Gesellschaft, 1978) and Dieter Hertz-Eichenrode, *Politik und Landwirtschaft in Ostpreußen* (Cologne: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1969).

8. Tönnies' book, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, was published in 1887.

9. The editors of the *Weimar Republic Sourcebook* make a similar claim based solely on the demographics of town and city. As I argue below, the patterns of *employment* offer contradictory evidence on this point. See *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 412.

10. The Weimar Republic saw heated debates on nearly every aspect of the modernization processes that had swept through the Western democracies beginning in the late nineteenth century. These extremely complex debates are usually examined today in binary fashion: city versus countryside,



August Sander.
Jungbauern
(Young Farmers).
1929.

spectrum had increasingly coalesced along the lines of the debate. The National Socialists had systematically built their electoral base in rural areas through careful exploitation of an antiurbanism bred in crisis and fed by prejudice and propaganda. The parties of the center and left were by and large content to cede this ground, a political strategy that, in historical perspective, led not merely to their demise but to that of German democracy as a whole. Interestingly, Gustav Stresemann, the

Americanism versus pure Germanness, technology versus nature. The best general discussion of German modernization in the 1920s remains Peukert's *The Weimar Republic*. A more specific discussion of anti-industrialism on the right as well as the left can be found in Helga Grebing, *Linksradikalismus gleich Rechtsradikalismus. Eine Falsche Gleichung* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1969). A generous introduction to many primary source materials in these debates can be found in the *Weimar Republic Sourcebook*.

foreign minister and former chancellor, had forecast something like this as early as 1926: "What is regrettable about current developments is the excessive emphasis being placed purely on considerations of economics and profession in the political battle. If the idea behind the Economic Party is victorious, then the political life of the German people will eventually break up into an agricultural interest and into industrial groups . . . but unfortunately there will be no common spiritual bond."¹¹

It is thus not farfetched to see the fall of the great coalition on March 27, 1930, as a direct result of the twinned economic crises of 1928.¹² Although usually viewed as the final seizure in Weimar's crisis of legitimation, that is, as the final blow to the rapidly disintegrating political culture that had held the Republic together, the fall of the coalition and the opening toward first authoritarian and soon thereafter totalitarian rule is in an important way the most obvious surface manifestation of the deeper socioeconomic upheaval after 1928. The two crises, political and economic, need to be thought together. No more compelling evidence for this exists than the virtually coterminous demise in 1930 of the broad series of agreements that had marked the founding of Germany's first democracy: the very form of the government, the new social agenda, and the corporatist compromise that put German industry back on its feet.

Agriculture and Industry in August Sander's Das Antlitz der Zeit

These debates play themselves out very directly in August Sander's *Antlitz der Zeit* (The face of our time) of 1929.¹³ Sander intended the slender volume as the introduction to the larger project that would have given meaning to his life's work, the publication of 540 portraits of Germans from every class, profession, and ideological position in the society. This huge, Balzacian encyclopedia, which bore the working title *Citizens of the Twentieth Century*, fell, like so many artistic ambitions of the period, victim to fascism. *Antlitz der Zeit* and its sixty portraits remains the only presentation overseen by Sander himself of this huge project based on more than forty thousand photographs he had taken before 1946 (when thirty thousand of his negatives were destroyed by fire). *Antlitz der Zeit* presents itself as a sequence of

11. Quoted in Jones, *Gustav Stresemann*, p. 286.

12. On the structural collapse of the Republic, see Karl Dietrich Bracher, *Die Auflösung der Weimarer Republik. Eine Studie zum Problem des Machtverfalls in der Demokratie* (Stuttgart: Ring Verlag, 1957), and David Abraham, *The Collapse of the Weimar Republic: Political Economy and Crisis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

13. *Antlitz der Zeit. Sechzig Aufnahmen deutscher Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts, von August Sander. Mit einer Einleitung von Alfred Döblin* (Munich: Transmere Verlag, 1929).

individual and group portraits arranged for the most part according to profession or station in life. Each image appears alone, with a blank facing page, and is accompanied by a minimal description of the profession portrayed and, occasionally, by the date of the image.¹⁴ Sander was intensely aware of the complex structure of his volume; in one of his few comments on *Antlitz der Zeit*, he warned, in fact, against any overemphasis on the individual image: "A successful photo is only a preliminary step toward the intelligent use of photography. . . . Photography is like a mosaic that becomes a synthesis only when it is presented *en masse*."¹⁵ Sander's use of the term mosaic highlights the filiation of all these volumes to the larger uses of montage in Weimar; like the Dada photomontage, or montage essays by Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, or the montage films that followed in the wake of Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, meaning arises in the photo-essay as individual images and individual details are absorbed into larger constellations.

The images themselves fall into a number of clearly defined sections. The reader first encounters a series of portraits of peasants and farmers shot mainly in the outdoors, which is to say in their place of work. These are followed by a few images depicting life in small provincial towns. Then, after a transition marked by the insertion of an image depicting a thoroughly modern type—the boxer, with his connections to Weimar's leisure industry—comes a series of smaller sections devoted to the urban division of labor: 1) urban artisans (a locksmith, a carpet layer); 2) images of urban industrial workers, a series capped by a kind of trinity: a workers' council, a group of anarchists, and a group of student revolutionaries; 3) images of the new, increasingly dominant urban class analyzed by Siegfried Kracauer, the *Angestellten*, or white-collar workers in the employ of the state and large service industries; 4) the professional and upper-middle classes; 5) capital itself; and directly following it 6) the arts. The volume concludes with the representation of Weimar's urban disenfranchised: images of their bartender, their priest, and then of an unemployed and wholly denatured seaman and a similarly destitute—materially and psychologically—industrial laborer.

The smooth flow of images from countryside through small town to city suggests, of course, the important demographic shift that had taken place in Germany in the first three decades of the century.¹⁶ Sander's *evaluation* of that

14. Sander photographed his subjects over a long period; the earliest images date from around 1905, the latest from the months immediately preceding the publication of the volume in 1929.

15. August Sander, letter to the photographer Abelen, January 16, 1951, cited in *August Sander: Citizens of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Gunther Sander (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), p. 36.

16. Karl Bade has shown that the percentage of workers employed in agriculture recovered briefly in the early 1920s from a long-term decline; stabilization and its concomitant revitalization of the industrial sector ensured that this was only a brief interlude. See Bade, "Arbeitsmarkt, Bevölkerung

shift, though, is embedded in the complex arguments that make up his book. Contemporary critics of *Antlitz der Zeit* immediately recognized its polemical and indeed political intent.¹⁷ Alfred Döblin, in his introduction, was the first to recognize Sander's analytical model, "a kind of cultural history, or rather sociology, of the last thirty years."¹⁸ Exactly where the depicted society has come from, however, where it is going, and where its proper center should lie remained subjects of debate. Döblin locates that center in the combination of theory and practice embodied by the images of workers' councils and revolutionaries. "The tensions of our time become clear when one sees these engaged students, and then compares them to this professor and this bourgeois family, very peaceful, embedded in satisfaction, still wholly without any notion of what is to come."¹⁹ One suspects that the book's Nazi readers interpreted the volume much as had Döblin: upon the assumption of power, the Nazi cultural ministry banned the book and ordered all printing blocks destroyed. Later readings have tended almost without exception to deflect the political significance of the book, finding its significance to lie in the realms of sociology or aesthetics. Ulrich Keller, perhaps the best informed of Sander's critics, sees in the "orderly succession" of the images a static reflection of the "stratification of society," a sociology based solely on the physiognomy of Sander's

und Wanderungen in der Weimarer Republik," in *Die Weimarer Republik. Belagerte Civitas*, ed. Michael Stürmer (Königstein: Athenäum, 1980), pp. 16ff.

17. For a discussion of the contemporary reception, see Keller, "Face of the Time," in *August Sander: Citizens of the Twentieth Century*, pp. 54–55.

18. Döblin, introduction to *Antlitz der Zeit*, p. 13.

19. Döblin, p. 14–15.



Sander. Pastry Chef. 1929.

Mother and daughter, wives of a farmer and a miner. 1912.

Proletarian mother. 1929.

sitters.²⁰ Ian Jeffrey, in a reading representative of the formalism that reigns unchallenged in most contemporary photographic criticism, differentiates Sander's subjects neither by social function, as does Keller, nor by potential for change, as does Döblin, but by the degree to which the sitters present themselves "thoroughly at home, self-possessed and unaffected" to the camera.²¹ For Jeffrey's aestheticizing eye, the "highest peak of civilization" is precisely the intelligentsia, a painter, a composer, and a sculptress.²² The differences in these readings betray a fundamental tension in Sander's survey: it is at once a diachronic survey of the

20. Keller, "Sander and Portrait Photography," in Sander, ed., *August Sander: Citizens of the Twentieth Century*, p. 1.

21. Jeffrey, *Photography: A Concise History*, p. 135.

22. Puzzlingly enough, Jeffrey associates these figures, including the painter Jankel Adler and the composer Paul Hindemith, with socialism, because "several left-wingers and revolutionaries also included in the survey" betray a similar self-possession. Aside from the obvious fact that capital separates



becoming of a society *and* at the same time synchronic, a cross section of a society caught at one moment in 1929.

Read in this way, the essay's two patterns produce constant local tensions. The momentum of the transition away from the land and into the cities is caught brilliantly in one of the earliest photographs, the well-known portrait of three young peasant beaus on the way to a dance.²³ The incongruity of the country setting, with its unpaved, overgrown path, and the mock-urban, "Sunday-best" attire of the three young men gives the photo its particular edge. Even within the photograph, a certain "progression" is to be discerned. The leftmost figure is clearly the one with the deepest, presumably permanent roots in the rural environment. His wrinkled clothing, unkempt hair, and the uncertainty mixed with dawning hostility with which he meets the camera eye all contrast tellingly with the habitus of the two remaining figures. If the first figure leans ever so slightly backward, toward the country, the lead figure leans forward in anticipation. Not just the clothing, but especially the physiognomies of these figures point to a more or less successful imitation of urban styles. The arched eyebrow of the third figure, claiming a status as an urban aristocrat in the making, finishes the gestural repertoire, a repertoire that articulates a societal direction *and* its contradictions.

Yet the halting cityward movement of the society suggested in this image and in the more general sequencing of the volume is constantly interrupted. Between the series of images of urban artisans and that of the urban proletariat, for example, Sander inserts a sequence of rural images: the wives of peasants and miners and the children of rural workers, all in a natural setting. This contrastive image subtly disrupts the rhythm of Sander's presentation and acts as an irritant to any reading that discerns only a straightforward and progressive movement from agriculture to urban industry. And it shows that Sander is subtly aware, too, of the persistent signs of what Ernst Bloch has called *Gleichzeitigkeiten*, evidence of the simultaneity of a mode of production passing away and one now taking shape.²⁴ The sequence of images suggests, then, the survival of agricultural lives, as well as patterns and ideas, in the urban environment.

The sequence of the images similarly undercuts all readings that attribute

these two groups in the book, even Jeffrey's own criteria betray him: the most decadent of the bourgeois figures portrayed, and especially a high school student, betray at the same time the highest degree of self-possession.

23. This image has provoked, early and late, some of the most pointed commentary on Sander. His contemporaries, from the right as well as the left, singled it out as a grotesque parody of country life, the products of a "cinema and department-store culture." The image stands today as one of Sander's most complex physiognomic treatises.

24. Ernst Bloch, "Technik und Geistererscheinungen," in *Verfremdungen I* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1962), pp. 177-85.

mastery or superiority to one segment of society or another. Döblin's heroes, the revolutionary forces, indeed follow immediately upon the images of workers, but they are in turn immediately followed by the images of the bourgeoisie, capital, and the intelligentsia. The traditional agents of change are superseded historically, in other words, by the powerful association of middle class, capital, and intelligentsia, who are bound together in Sander's volume not merely by proximity on the page, but by dress, attitude, and *especially* by the abstraction of the backgrounds against which they are shot. Only here do we find the full erasure of milieu that elsewhere leaps out so vividly from the book: peasants, workers, revolutionaries, and artisans, all are defined as much by their depicted environment as by their persons. The reader of Sander's images cannot decide with any degree of certainty which of these groups is valorized: some of the figures set against abstracted backgrounds are portrayed as decadent, a pose which stands out strongly in contrast to the proud, self-contained naturalness of many of the other figures. Yet no small number of the figures portrayed in their environment look out from denatured, defeated countenances. It is because of this neutrality in Sander's image-making that the last images, of the *Lumpenproletarier*, the dispossessed sailor and worker, present such a challenge: are they necessary, perhaps unavoidable results of societal transition? Is their plight traceable to the abandonment of the land and the sea through the move to the city, or is it, more brutally, the result of capital's segmentation of the society with privilege restricted to the sections from the middle class upward?

The synchronic structure that underlies and occasionally disrupts these diachronic patterns offers, if not solutions, then different constellations. Those same "out of sequence" images—farmers' and miners' wives, the "urban peasantry" I have described above—suggest that the undeniable stratification and segmentation of a modern society depicted in *Antlitz der Zeit* is nonetheless hardly impermeable or resistant to change. Sander's book presents a Germany in which the question "agriculture or industry" has certainly been decided "in favor of" the city and its highly technologized and specialized industrial formations. Yet that same society is shot through with human elements that suggest that nature and the land have not been abandoned. They continue to bracket urban modernity and indeed insert into it a chthonic element; this, surely is the function of the peasants' and miners' wives. Despite this suggestion, Sander altogether avoids the unalloyed nostalgia of the right, its cries for the demolition of modernity and the return to an agrarian society. This bracketing evokes, though, the limits of technological utopia and, in particular, of a wholly urbanized politics in 1929. Peasants and small farmers had not been left behind in some faded historical moment. Their role in society had diminished, but it was still substantial. Sander's book suggests indirectly, then, some of the reasons for the steady growth of Nazi electoral successes in the late 1920s. Leftist political agitation was confined—in the image sequence as in the Republic itself—to an urban milieu, and it ignored the rural population, both in the country and after its partial transplantation to the city. The Nazis, on the



Above left: Sander. Revolutionaries. 1929.



Above right: Catholic clergymen. 1929.



Above left: Industrial magnate. Commercial councillor A.v.G., Cologne. 1929.

Above right: The composer P.H. 1929.

other hand, methodically built their base in a countryside ignored by the left and insufficiently attended to by the center. Sander's argument in images is anything but reactionary; it is instead matter-of-fact, even-handed in its political comment, and sympathetic to every segment of the society.

Realism and Avant-Garde: The Debate over the "New Photography"

The photo-essays I consider here are inflected, of course, by more than the debates on agriculture and industry, nature and technology. The two most widely discussed photo books of the period—Renger-Patzsch's *Die Welt ist schön* and Roh/Tschichold's *Foto-Auge*—also engage a heated debate on the proper role of photography in modern society. This exchange, which came to include a broad range of critics as well as a number of prominent photographers, examined the nature and possible effect of the photography now referred to as the "New Photography" or "New Vision." The textual and visual fields that developed are too often understood as a battle between traditional, socially conservative "realist" or "straight" photographers and progressive, socially and politically left avant-gardists. In this view, the stakes are purely aesthetic and formal. As I hope to show, however, this was at base a dispute regarding not only the *social* implications of advanced photographic practices, but important *anthropological* ones as well.

László Moholy-Nagy had set the terms of the discussion as early as 1922, in the essay "Production—Reproduction."²⁵ Moholy was intensely interested in the historicization of human sense perception. "Man is a synthesis of all his sensory faculties, i.e., at any given stage he is most perfect when his constituent faculties are developed to the limit of their potential."²⁶ And he assigns the leading role in this process to art, which is "instrumental in this development . . . for art attempts to create new relationships between familiar and as yet unfamiliar data, optical, acoustic, or whatever, and forces us to take it all in through our sensory equipment." This essay's principal contribution to our understanding of the role of new media developed on the basis of new technologies lies in its distinction between what Moholy calls "reproduction" and "production." Reproduction is the mimetic replication of an external reality: this "reiteration of relationships that already exist" can have little effect on the development of new perceptual capacities, since such art

25. The standard work on Moholy's photographic practice remains Andreas Haus, *Moholy-Nagy. Fotos und Fotogramme* (Munich: Schirmer-Mosel, 1978). For a straightforward account of Moholy's photographic theory and practice, see Eleanor M. Hight, *Picturing Modernism: Moholy-Nagy and Photography in Weimar Germany* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).

26. László Moholy-Nagy, "Production-Reproduction," trans. Caroline Fawkes, in *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913–1940*, ed. Christopher Phillips (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989), pp. 79–80.

forms merely reproduce relationships already accessible to the senses. "Production," however, intends forms of art that actively create new relationships. For Moholy, the automatism of the camera lens is a necessary prosthesis, an extension of the range and power of the human visual apparatus that alone can open to human cognition new relationships between the elements of what Benjamin would later call new "image-worlds."²⁷ Moholy intends here not so much the revelation of things *as they are*, not the "true nature" of the modern world, but instead a deflection of photography toward its potential for cognitive and perceptual reform. The wholly abstract photogram, in its manipulation of the reflection and absorption of light by varying surfaces, can play a more important role in this process than can the most aesthetically revolutionary depiction of a radio tower or a bridge in Marseilles. As such, Moholy's theories on photography as a technological prosthesis remain inseparable from an anthropology; they remain rooted in a call for a reformation of the human cognitive apparatus and in the values and behaviors that are based upon it.²⁸ As the decade progressed, Moholy's ideas and photographic practice became increasingly influential; the marks of that influence, though, increasingly took on the character of a strong misreading that wholly ignored the anthropological dimensions of Moholy's theory and practice of photography.

Opposed to Moholy's ideas of production, one finds in the debate on the New Photography a range of ideas that can be grouped under the broad umbrella of a photographic realism. In discursive statements and in work by a broad range of photographers often identified with the term *Neue Sachlichkeit*, one finds in Germany in the late 1920s the conviction that photography is the sole representational medium adequate to its *object*, the new, technologized urban landscape. The photographic medium must be made to articulate a new reality; it must be able to represent what had heretofore been a constant, though unconscious, achievement of the modern urban German. The realists insisted that the photograph approximate the "apperceptive level of the average city dweller."²⁹ Renger-Patzsch, who gradually emerged as Moholy's principal antagonist in the debate, put the latter position in the following way: "Photography has its own techniques and its own means. . . . The secret of a good photograph—one that can possess artistic qualities such as those possessed by a work of visual art—resides in its realism. . . . Only photography can

27. Walter Benjamin, "News about Flowers," trans. Michael Jennings, in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume Two: 1927–1934* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 156. This essay, a discussion of Karl Blossfeldt's plant photographs in *Urformen der Kunst*, offers a repertoire of important vocabulary on photography. Benjamin's derivation of key aspects of his media theory from his exchanges with Moholy in the early 1920s remains to be examined.

28. For an extended discussion of the anthropological premises of Moholy's theories, see Gerhard Glühen, "Moholy-Nagy: 'Lichtner,'" in László Moholy-Nagy, *Frühe Photographien* (Berlin: Verlag Dirk Nishen, 1989), pp. 103–5.

29. Molderings, "Urbanism and Technological Utopianism," p. 91.

do justice to the stark web of lines of modern technology, to the massive girders of cranes and bridges, to the dynamism of 1,000 horsepower machines.”³⁰ And indeed many contemporary observers perceived a direct correspondence between the new photography and the processes of technological modernization so prevalent in Germany. “The purely technological and machine-oriented world is being made into art” claimed the contemporary critic Erwin Quedenfeldt:

It has already been stamped as our period style. Entranced by the success of technology, there should now arise an objective art [*eine Sachkunst*], an artistically utilitarian form, in short an engineer’s art, and this purely practical form displayed by automobiles, iron bridges, concrete buildings, factories, zeppelins, airplanes, etc. is now supposed to replace the art created by artists on the basis of an interior vision.³¹

This broad consensus produced no shortage of photographic collections that confirmed and occasionally developed this premise. Their titles say a good deal about the new, symbiotic relationship that developed between photography, capitalism, and the built environment: *The Beauty of Technology*; *Technological Beauty*; *Iron and Steel*.

This is a central differentiation: Moholy privileges the potential effect on the human *subject* of the photographic apparatus, while Renger-Patzsch and many “realists” emphasize, in their discursive statements, the unique suitability of the photographic medium to its new, technologized *object*. This distinction, though, has largely been obscured by the use of the phrase the “New Photography,” which is taken to mean the work and techniques of the photographers in Germany working in the wake of Moholy’s theory and practice. Yet the “New Photography” defined itself not in terms of its implications for a new human perception and cognition, but in terms of the adequacy of its representational strategies, measured by the standard of the new urban world. It entailed above all else the selection of radically new perspectives for the camera.³² If camera angle is taken to be the determinate differentiation, the debate on photography in the late 1920s did indeed seem to oppose, as Christopher Phillips has suggested, “Moholy’s experimental attitude” against Renger-Patzsch’s “commitment to photographic realism.”³³ If the photographic production of the period is viewed, however, from a vantage determined by Moholy’s own insistence on the primacy of human sensory

30. Renger-Patzsch, “Ziele,” *Das deutsche Lichtbild 1* (1927), p. xviii.

31. Quedenfeldt, untitled essay in *Das deutsche Lichtbild* (1929). Cited in Molderings, *Fotografie der Weimar Republic*, p. 22.

32. Moholy himself had unwittingly obscured the thrust of his ideas by offering his own proleptic inventory of such strategies in his *Painting, Photography, Film* of 1925.

33. Phillips, *Photography in the Modern Era*, p. 83.

development, surprising constellations of photographers emerge from each “camp.” Realists who might be expected to provide a thematic inventory of modernity instead offer a school for perception; and avant-gardists, working self-consciously to apply the principles Moholy had pioneered, offer surprising social commentary based solely on the thematic—that is, the reproductive—content of their work.

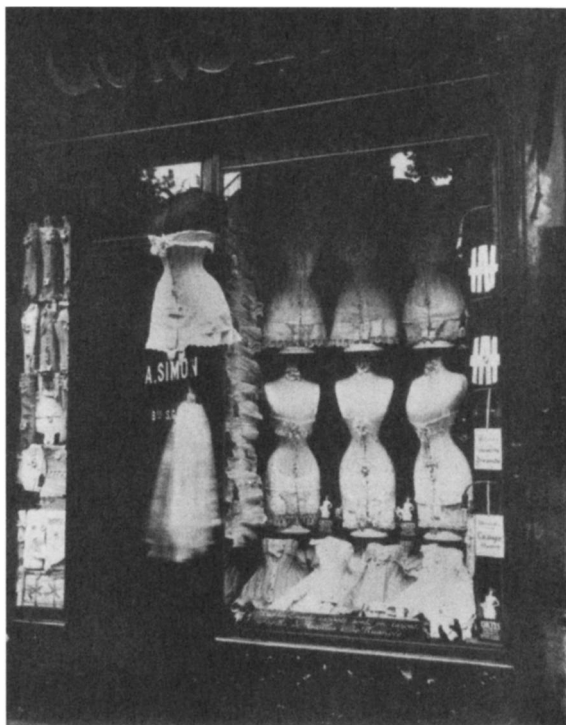
Foto-Auge: Nature, Technology, Apocalypse

Franz Roh and Jan Tschichold’s photographic anthology *Foto-Auge*, together with Werner Graeff’s *Es kommt der neue Fotograf*, were conceived as part of a large project associated with the massive “Film und Foto” exhibition in Stuttgart, certainly the most important photography exhibition in the 1920s in Europe.³⁴ These volumes sought to disseminate the ideas about photography on display at the exhibition. Franz Roh, the art historian and co-editor of the volume, was explicit in his understanding of Moholy’s work as a development of photography based on the requirements of the *object*: “Moholy believes that, in the camera, we already have that apparatus which . . . was created to satiate the hunger for the object.”³⁵ Any casual perusal of *Foto-Auge* indeed finds a wealth of the strategies and motifs associated with the “New Photography” that had dominated the Stuttgart show. And the popular reception of the work certainly was alive to this emphasis. Berlin’s *Fotographische Rundschau* called *Foto-Auge* an “orientation” to the “most modern efforts” in photography; *Der Film* heralded the volume as an “art history of modern photography,” “a compendium of today’s leading visual ideas.”³⁶ Yet the presentation of the images in the book offers a first indication that other forces are at work here as well. The layout differs significantly from the display strategies used in the photo-essays by Sander and Renger-Patzsch, which present sequences of single photographs, each with a blank facing page. *Foto-Auge* presents, instead, sequences of pairs of photographs. The first interplay occurs, then, between these pairs, before more complex sequences of images even come into play. If units of meaning arise in Sander’s *Antlitz der Zeit* out of the interplay between sequences of images (peasants in the countryside versus urban artisans) or through radical disruptions of these sequences, the crosstalk in *Foto-Auge* takes place first between mates

34. For a reconstruction and evaluation of “FiFo,” as it came to be known, see “Internationale Ausstellung des Deutschen Werkbunds. Film und Foto” in *Stationen der Moderne. Die bedeutenden Kunstausstellungen des 20. Jahrhunderts in Deutschland* (Berlin: Berlinische Galerie, 1988), pp. 236–73.

35. Roh, introduction to *László Moholy-Nagy. 60 Fotos*, ed. Franz Roh (Berlin: Klinkhardt + Biermann, 1930), p. 3.

36. Both excerpts from reviews are cited on the back cover of Roh’s *Moholy-Nagy. 60 Fotos*.



in a pair, and only then between larger sequences of paired photographs. And the meanings that arise as photographs are reconstellated are seldom based primarily on formal similarities, but instead on thematic relations.

The first pair is instructive and highly complex. The volume opens with Atget's now famous view of a Parisian shop window with corsets displayed in a way that emphasizes their seriality. This is juxtaposed to an anonymous news bureau shot of a female diver coming off a board and about to enter a swimming pool; it is very "New Photography" in its abrasive angle and stylized, abstract use of the body as a design element. In terms of photographic history, Atget is announced here as the godfather of much of what has followed.³⁷ But Atget's technique, and in particular the aura that emanates from his sepia tonalities, seems to be left behind by the anonymous New Photographer, who uses the unusual angle from which the photograph is taken to rhyme the angle of the diver's body. And if the formal relationship of the two images remains somewhat opaque, their thematic interconnection is considerably more obscure.

Atget's image, which is one of a series of shots of shop windows, is a meditation on processes of commodity capitalism, fetishism, and reflection. Reflection in

37. This was of course a new idea. Atget's work was only then beginning to find wide recognition, as Berenice Abbot published and championed it.

all senses: the reflection of the street in the glass, the remarkable reflective effect of making the reflected image serve as an apparently real, yet thoroughly operatic space for the corsets, and the way that the image suggests that this illusory space created by reflection is the space within which we encounter and are attracted by commodities. Yet the relationship of serial commodification and reflection to the diver is left wholly open. This dimension of the pair becomes clearer only later, on rereading and comparison with other pairs. We can say provisionally, however, that Atget's image alone suggests the limitations of the widespread view of *Foto-Auge* as little more than a display of photo technique. This ignores its socially critical, very dark side: thematically, the volume deploys advanced technology in a way that suggests that utopia may be giving way to dystopia. In order to look ahead, let me only suggest here that the diver, too, inaugurates a theme for the essay. She is about to disappear beneath the waves, and so functions as a harbinger of more specific arguments to come.

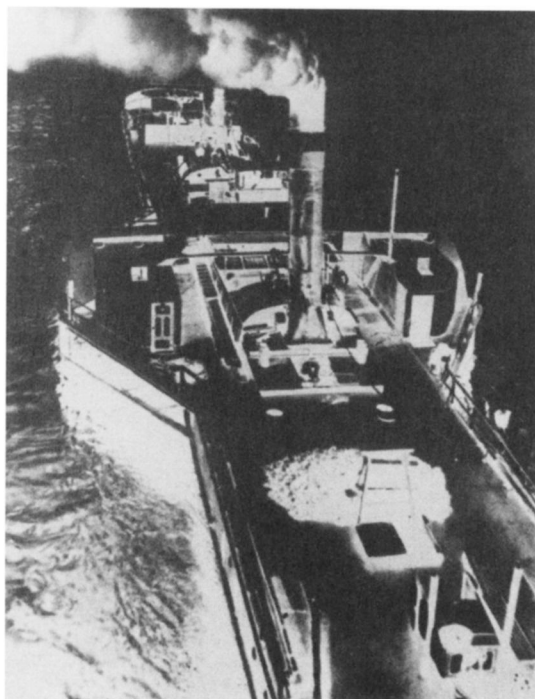
The second pairing turns emphatically toward issues centered on nature and technology and so announces an important thematic preoccupation of the book as a whole. An Arvid Gutschow image of dunes in a desert-like landscape, an image that has been bleached or washed out, so that the sand of the dunes blends without distinction or horizon into a gray, dead sky, faces a negative image of a

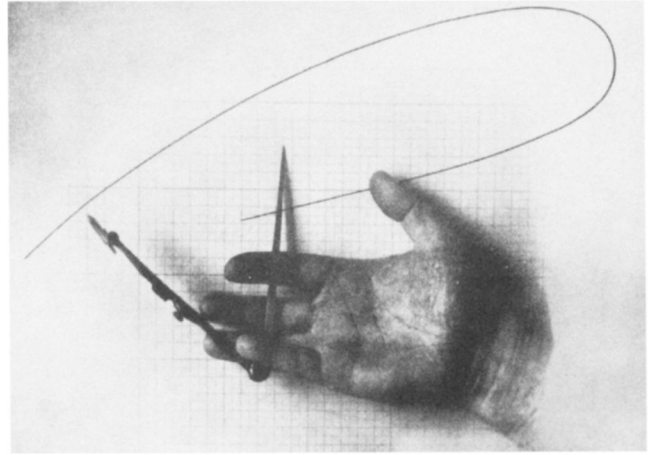
Above left: Eugene Atget. Corsets, Boulevard de Strasbourg.

Above right: New York Times Photo Service. The Plunge.

Below left: Arvid Gutschow. Dunes.

Right: Andreas Feininger. Steam Tug on the Elbe (Negative).

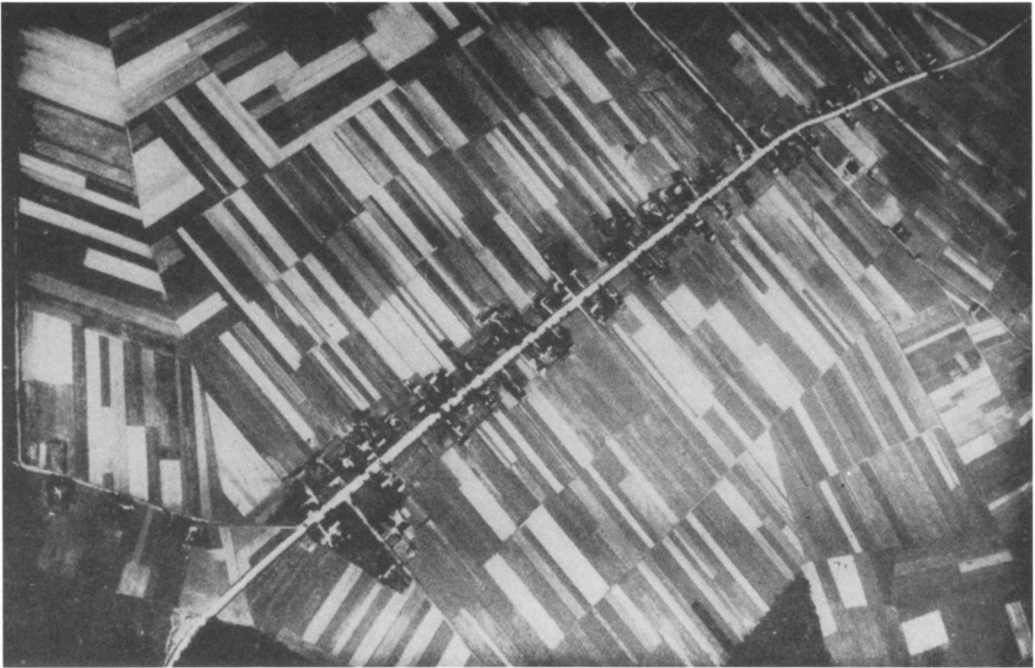




Left: Florence Henri. Self-Portrait.
Above: El Lissitzky. Composition.
Right: Aero-Kartographisches Institut Breslau.
Massao in Upper Silesia.

steam tug on the Elbe by Andreas Feininger. The use of the negative image serves to blend the ship, the sky, and the water in a disturbing way and, of course, in a manner that echoes the Gutschow in reverse. The second pair also develops with considerable subtlety central aspects of the first pair. On the left is the desert, paralleling Atget's desert of commodification, on the right a ship that seems to float rather precariously on the troubled water. Does the diver's position suggest that the ship, too, is about to sink? In any case, the tonalities of the two images strongly suggest that reality has bled away into the photograph, a process initiated in Atget's disquisition on reflection. In its early pages, *Foto-Auge* argues for a pervasive loss of the real. And that loss is common to rural nature and urban industry.

The next two pairings rehearse arguments concerning human subjectivity that had become very familiar to intellectuals in the late 1920s. We find two enigmatic self-portraits, one by the Bauhaus photography student Florence Henri and one by El Lissitzky. Each of these self-portraits shuttles between the presence and the absence of the human subject: the Lissitzky through metonymy, in that he is present through the representation of his hand, the other through reflection, in that the lens sees not Henri herself—what we see “directly” is a blank metal face-like ball—but rather her reflection. This is followed by the pairing of Max Burchartz's famous doll face, an image that presents a doll's eye from a proximity so great as to render it uncanny, with George Grosz and John Heartfield's Dada



photomontage *Dadamerika*. The New Photography has learned from Berlin Dada the violent dismemberment of the body, here through the concentration on detail to the exclusion of all else. This sequence is brought to a provisional conclusion two pairings further along. Sascha Stone's image of a card file is juxtaposed with an anonymous shot of a crowded beach. Rationalization schematizes the human subject, who is now seen to be threatened from two directions: from violence to the individual and from the threat of the loss of individuation through absorption into a rationalized mass.³⁸

As my rhetoric here indicates, Roh and Tschichold intervene with their photo-essay into the early stages of a critique of rationality that will achieve its salient form in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in 1947. The larger sequence of photos that examine subjectivity is in fact interrupted by a grouping that insists on the effects of rationalization on the built *and* the natural environment. A sequence of anonymous aerial photographs of fields and an urban railroad yard emphasize, in their resonances with abstract painting, the

38. For a discussion of the cultural reception of the processes of rationalization in Germany, see Charles S. Maier, "Between Taylorism and Technocracy: European Ideologies and the Vision of Productivity in the 1920s," *Journal of Contemporary History* 5 (1970), pp. 27–51. Rationalization and Taylorism were often debated under the larger rubrics "Americanism" and "Fordism." For a suggestive analysis of the cultural manifestations of these debates, see Erhard Schütz, *Romane der Weimarer Republik* (Munich: Fink, 1986). An introduction to a range of primary sources is to be found in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, pp. 60–85; 393–411.

extent to which technology—both agricultural and photographic—organizes and subjugates nature. As Kracauer wrote in 1927:

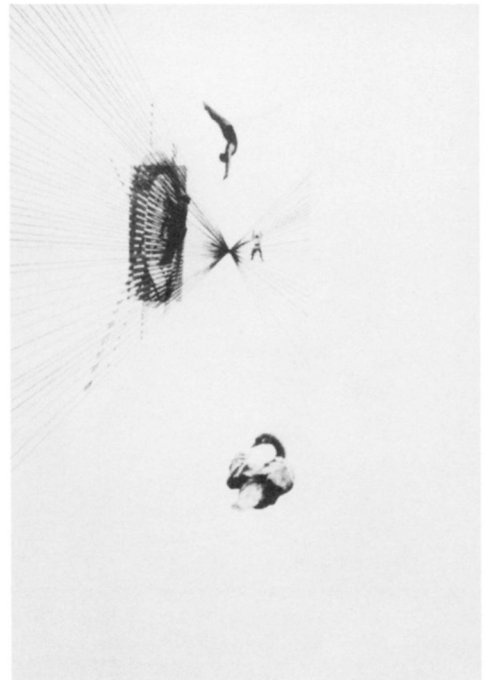
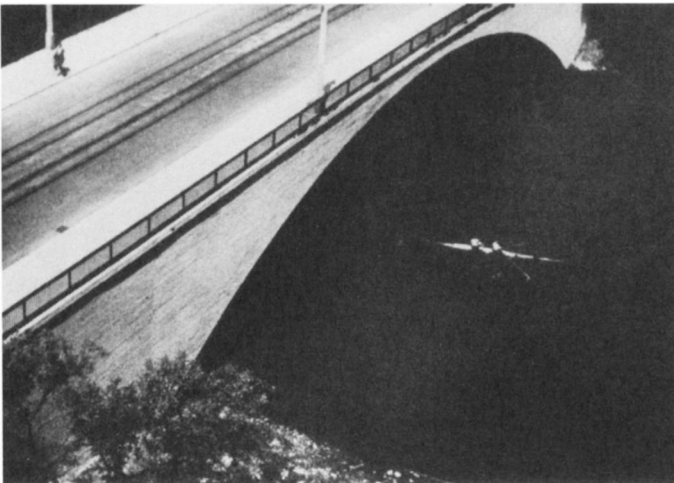
In serving the breakthrough of truth, the historical process becomes a process of demythologization which effects a radical deconstruction of the positions that the natural continually reoccupied. . . . [I]n the course of history it may be that nature, increasingly stripped of its magic, will become more and more pervious to reason.³⁹

Foto-Auge at once reveals and, in its simultaneous deployment and critique of technology, participates in these historical processes.

The central early pairings in *Foto-Auge* all speak, then, to problems of absence, erasure, and violence as they relate to the human subject in a rapidly modernizing society. These themes are present regardless of whether the images represent the loss of reality in a world of images, technology's imposition of an alien identity upon nature, the loss of subjectivity through erasure or absorption, or—as in the next sequence—the loss of personal integrity through a kind of

39. Siegfried Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament," in *The Mass Ornament*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 80.

Below: Hans Finsler. Bridge.
Right: Lázló Moholy-Nagy. Leda.



morphing in which human features are shown to dissolve into natural ones. In a juxtaposition of images by Edward Weston and Herbert Bayer, a woman's breast is rhymed with the cone of a volcano. The pervasive note of these middle pages is, then, a particular kind of uncertainty: what is organic, what is inorganic? What is male, what is female? What is rational, what unconscious? This is all, in a way, the very long overture to the pairing that retrospectively reveals the central question of the volume: what will survive?

A brilliantly perspectival Herbert Bayer image of a racing shell about to pass under a bridge and out of sight is paired with Moholy's well-known photomontage *Leda*, with its bridge-like fan of vectors and a swan in a white void below it. This image deploys a diver at its upper reaches, a diver about to disappear beneath the waves or vectors. The thematic complexity of *Foto-Auge* achieves a first resolution on these pages. The seeming innocence of Atget's corsets and the anonymous diver are here lent a mythic significance. The young woman in Moholy's photomontage is seduced by something that is other than what it seems to be. Just as Zeus seduces as a swan, so too do the corsets as commodities in Atget's shop window. They are distorted not so much by their fetishized nature, as Marx would have it, but by the unreal sensory space in which they are displayed. Similarly, the dive into the pool of the first pair loses its innocent verve when inserted into the pervasive figuration of water in *Foto-Auge*. Water threatens even as it beckons: the diver, the tug, the sculler on the river, and *Leda* are about to disappear. The myth evoked here is that of a society going underwater: Weimar is figured as Atlantis. Nature's revolt against the technological ends in its erasure of all culture.

The next pages drive home the Atlantis theme relentlessly. John Heartfield's montaged book jacket for Upton Sinclair's *After the Flood*, in which a great wave swallows a city, is paired with a negative image in which a modern skyscraper swallows the reflection of a neoclassical house. These pages are linked internally in a formal manner—both are negative images—and thus refer back to the bleeding away of the positive image into an unreal space visible in the first pages of the book. Immediately afterward comes Roh's own *Underwater*, a negative strip with nine images, all of them variations on the theme of going down to Atlantis. This is ironically rhymed by Umbo's *Winter Landscape*, in which a few threatened humans huddle together in a snow-filled park, refusing, like Georg Bendemann's father in Kafka's "The Judgment," to be covered over.

The final pages of *Foto-Auge* shift the scene, though not the tonality, of the central arguments of the essay. In the final four images, we have left behind the mythic evocation of a society threatened with a watery extinction to the representation of threats to German society that are increasingly historically specific. A horrible image of a political murder drawn from the Stuttgart police archives faces an image from the Imperial war archives that shows a dead horse on a bridge during World War I. This final reference to water and that which spans it is representative: all images of bridges, all efforts at mediation between opposite shores, seem fated to go under. It is no accident that these are documentary photographs with no

hint of the avant-garde about them. The final pairing intensifies this effect, as it cuts sharply against the technological utopianism that informs Moholy's thought and much of the practice of the New Photography: technology is no longer a sufficient motor for social change, it can no longer hold a society above the rising water line. A Burchartz montage ad for a factory (wheels and axles) is paired with a sobering montage of images from Dziga Vertov's films: between a shrouded corpse at the top and revolution in the streets at the bottom is an unblinking eye; a figure for technologized vision, for surveillance, for the panopticon.

Foto-Auge as advertisement for avant-garde photographic technique and *Foto-Auge* as the most discursive and polemical of the early photo-essays: these are not necessarily adversarial readings. Their coexistence in the book instead suggests the rapidity with which lately radical aesthetic forms can be recuperated and turned to thematic and indeed ideological ends. In this sense, *Foto-Auge* is best understood within the broader context of mass media and propaganda in the late Weimar Republic, a context more commonly adduced in the discussion of, say, Heartfield's montage covers for the *Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung* or *Die Rote Fahne*. Moholy's grand project, though, the reformation of the sensory apparatus, finds itself covered over by the flood waters: not even his own images and photomontages can, in this context, perform more than a supporting role. The extension of Moholy's ideas was left to a different, and surprising, participant in the debate.

Renger-Patzsch: Things and a New Phenomenology of Vision

Albert Renger-Patzsch's reputation as the leading "straight" photographer in Weimar, really the only photographer worthy of mention alongside his great American precursors Sheeler, Strand, and Schamberg, is based primarily on his involvement with technology.⁴⁰ Renger-Patzsch's willingness to confront the strategies of the Weimar avant-garde with a seemingly straightforward realism focused on the machine drew a steady stream of vituperation from the political and aesthetic left. Foremost among his many critics is Walter Benjamin, who took him to task for the "transfiguration" of the objects he represented—Benjamin finds, along-

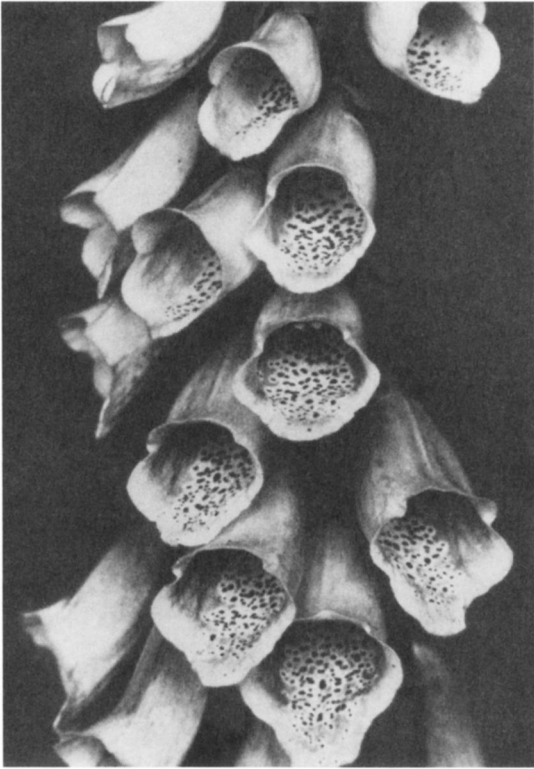
40. Of all the major Weimar photographers, none has been so ill-served as Renger-Patzsch. His work has been consistently reduced to a few shots of machines and plants. Any random image taken from Sander, say the often-reproduced images of the pastry cook, the boxers, or of Paul Hindemith, may well convey little of the diachronic dimension of his project, but they render testimony to Sander's technique and thematic focus. Renger-Patzsch's best-known images are a few close-ups of machine details and a few industrial landscapes. Other famous photos, especially that of the pair of potter's hands that made him famous, are viewed somewhat as aberrations. It is an understatement to say that these photographs are in no sense representative of Renger-Patzsch's work.

side an impermissible aestheticization, an elimination of the sensuous, human dimension of human labor in his photos of the modern workplace and its technology—and for the manner in which they represent—an anachronistic allegiance to a realism that flies in the face of the New Photography.⁴¹ Much of the force of Benjamin's critique derives from his understanding of the *title* of the volume that made Renger-Patzsch famous, *Die Welt ist schön* (The World Is Beautiful) of 1928. Of the many ironies that have informed the reception of Renger-Patzsch's work, this one is no doubt the most bitter: Renger-Patzsch himself had called the volume *Die Dinge* (Things), but his publisher, Kurt Wolff, had insisted on a title aimed at sales, a title emphasizing the sheer beauty of the images in the volume. Of all the Weimar essay books, this is the most varied and, at least to any cursory inspection, diffuse. As I hope to show, it is also the most visually challenging and ideationally subtle of the three volumes considered here.

It is in a sense not surprising that of these polemical volumes, *Die Welt ist schön*, like *Foto-Auge*, has seldom been examined as a unified work of art. Renger-Patzsch's organizing principle is, to begin with, much less obvious than that of Sander or Roh and Tschichold. There is no historical progression evident, no incursion of one domain into another. The volume is organized rather statically into clearly defined groups of images: plants, animals, and humans; landscapes, commodities, architectural details, technological details, and industrial landscapes; and, finally, a last series of ten images that mixes shots from most of the foregoing. Yet sustained consideration reveals connections both within and between groups of images. These connections are only in the rarest of cases thematic. Instead, Renger-Patzsch constellates groups of pictures *exclusively* through formal rhyming, and these rhymed constellations are almost always self-referential, in that they suggest to the viewer the manner in which the visual information is to be assimilated. Always considered the most "traditional" Weimar photographer, Renger-Patzsch instead emerges here as a major modernist; in fact, only Moholy merits comparison. And this comparison is anything but random. More than any other Weimar photographers, Moholy and Renger-Patzsch were concerned to explore the problem of a contemporary optics. If Moholy was primarily concerned with the structures that a lens could *produce* in the world, Renger-Patzsch focused with remarkable intensity and originality on the manner in which the things of the world shape our vision.⁴² Renger-Patzsch himself was intensely aware of the

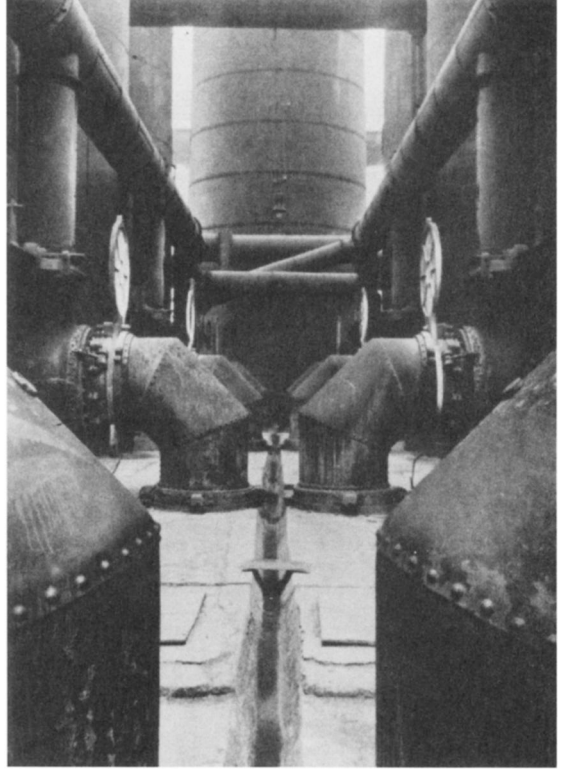
41. Benjamin's critique of Renger-Patzsch is adumbrated in "Little History of Photography" and extended in "The Author as Producer," both in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, pp. 526 and 774–75.

42. In the most recent consideration of *Die Welt ist schön* as a unified work of art, Matthew Simms accepts the standard differentiation of Renger-Patzsch as a realist, Moholy as an "experimental avant-gardist." Simms, "Just Photography: Albert Renger-Patzsch's *Die Welt ist schön*," *History of Photography* 31, no. 3 (Autumn 1997), p. 198.



Above left: Albert Renger-Patzsch. Foxglove. 1928.

Above right: Renger-Patzsch. Heterotrichum macrodum. 1928.



Above left: Renger-Patzsch. Storage for Cotton Socks. 1928.
Above right: Heaters in the Herrenwyk Blast Furnace. 1928.

role his book could have played in the formation of a new optics:

I believe I am right in saying that I wanted back then to see my book received less in a philosophical sense (as many falsely concluded from the title) than in a pedagogical one: as an ABC book that could show how one can achieve solutions to the dilemmas posed by images through purely photographic means.⁴³

Die Welt ist schön opens with twenty images of plants. The structural clarity, optical precision, and ravishing surface detail of the individual images elicit a primary, visceral sense that photographer and viewer are to share what Renger-Patzsch calls “joy before the object.”⁴⁴ The images as a *sequence*, however, produce different meanings, as they alternate between the celebration of surface and a shadowy suggestion of depth. The first image, an intense close-up of a foxglove, emphasizes less the materiality of the flower than the shadowy, recessional depth within each blossom. The second, *Heterotrichum macrodum*, emphasizes instead surface detail: the tiny hairs on the leaves and in the center of the plant. These images, and the remaining eighteen in the section, share salient characteristics: more than a few move beyond mimetic representation in their emphasis on arabesque and ornamentation. These images are often set against a neutral gray or black background. Indeed, very few of the images show plants in their natural setting. This abstraction and isolation serve an important purpose: they de-emphasize the naturalistic, straightforwardly descriptive aspect of the image in favor of its connotative and occasionally symbolic values.⁴⁵ In this light, reconsideration of that first image suggests that Renger-Patzsch is interested less in the flower qua flower than in its form; and in particular in the way in which vision is guided away from the clarity and certainty of the surface and down into the interior

43. Renger-Patzsch, quoted in Schöppe, *Meister der Kamera* (Haale, 1937); cited in Klaus Honnef, introduction to Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Fotografien 1925–1960*, ed. Klaus Honnef and Gregor Kierblewsky (Bonn: Rheinisches Landesmuseum, 1977), p. 25.

44. Donald Kuspit, in one of the few sustained considerations of Renger-Patzsch’s work in English, focuses exclusively on the fascination of the individual images. See Kuspit, *Albert Renger-Patzsch: Joy Before the Object* (New York: Aperture, 1993).

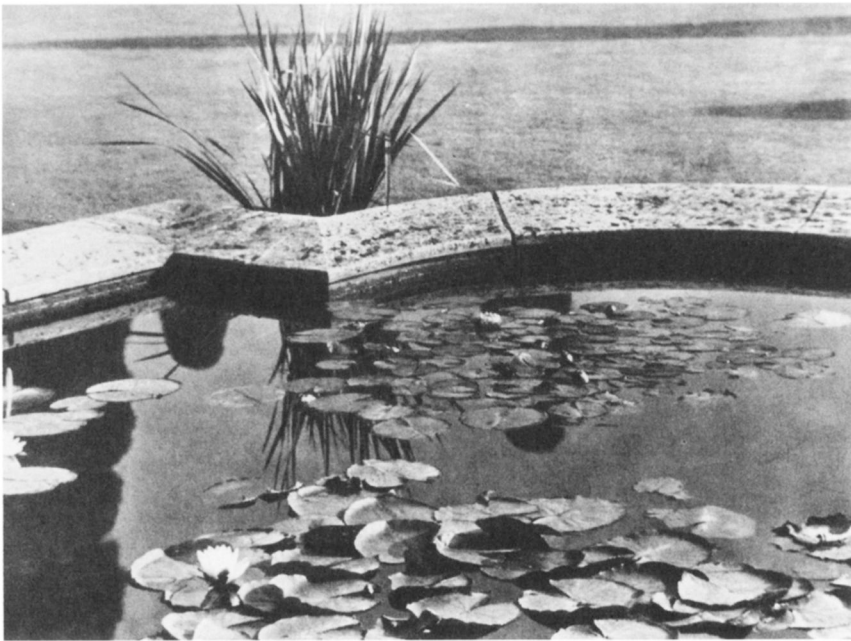
45. Many of these images, and especially the abstractions of plants and plant parts against a neutral background, are reminiscent of Karl Blossfeldt’s own plant photographs in his *Urformen der Kunst*, also of 1928. These images were originally created as a vast archive of natural models for Blossfeldt’s students of drawing at the Berlin Academy of the Arts. If the presentation of Renger-Patzsch’s sequences of images in *Die Welt ist schön* insists on the ways in which objects in the world structure patterns of vision, Blossfeldt’s images, in their dismemberment and abstraction, present plants and parts of plants as projections of a still-to-be-defined depth psychology.

of the blossom, with its mysterious and somewhat threatening darkness. It would be tempting, on the basis of a reading of the plant images in isolation, to surmise that Renger-Patzsch offers an ideologically charged—and, in the Weimar context, broadly conservative—view of the natural world as refuge and repository of a mysterious significance.⁴⁶ The intensity of these images, the glorification of the individual organic object, indeed seems to lend to these plants a mythic status.

Interestingly enough, Renger-Patzsch refuses to define nature as the sole site of hidden significance, even perhaps of spiritual renewal. Even in the much later section of the book in which Renger-Patzsch's most famous work appears, in the images of serially produced industrial products, the materiality, artificiality, and surface detail of the objects represented are undercut through an insistent exploration of hidden spaces between and behind the objects. In images of shoes, tiles, and stacks of lumber, Renger-Patzsch is able to suggest that pockets of significance exist even here: one is reminded of Benjamin's assertion that "truth is a ruffle on a dress." In an image of sorted hanks of cotton socks, the orderliness of the compartmentalization is subverted by the profusion of nonrectilinear shapes formed by the socks. The individual pieces, stored in wooden cubes, refuse to wholly conform to their confines, yielding a remarkable image of organicity. Here something mysterious enters in: one of the cubes is half full, leaving the upper left diagonal half empty. Light glimmers through slats at the back, suggesting a dark, mysterious, and vaguely threatening cave, the space of an oracle or site of a mystery. The structure of this image, which ties together the presentation of such spaces in many images in the section, also clearly echoes that of the first plant photos.

Most tellingly, that structure is discovered again in the heart of the most modern, most provocative factory setting. *Winderhitzer im Hochofenwerk Herrenwyk* is a very complex shot with enormous depth-of-field: we are given a sense of looking deep into a different sort of plant, much as one would look down the nave of a church. In the immediate foreground are two enormous objects between which the lens "looks," giving the viewer the sense of an aisle. We can identify these objects only because the pair is repeated three more times in the distance: they are enormous pipes or conduits. They seem to feed into a row of even larger, upright, silo-like pipes or tanks. The rear of the image is all but closed off by an even larger tank that rages upward out of the image. This tower leads the eye

46. And indeed, the conservative reaction to his book was uniformly positive. Wilhelm Hausenstein, a prominent right-wing critic, praised the "fervor and inwardness of [Renger-Patzsch's] intuition;" he reserved harsh words only for the inclusion of so much industrial subject matter. Hausenstein, *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten*, February 26, 1929; cited in Honnef, ed., *Renger-Patzsch*, p. 26. For a brief survey of the reception of the book, see Ulrich Rüter, "The Reception of Albert Renger-Patzsch's *Die Welt ist schön*," *History of Photography* 21, no. 3 (Autumn 1997), pp. 192–96.



Renger-Patzsch. Vineyard path, Ellerer Kapley. 1928.

Renger-Patzsch. Pool. 1928.

toward the sky, toward the infinite, toward the locus of all traditional German meaning. The factory, echoing the plants and the serially produced objects, is nothing less than a cathedral. We are reminded of what Charles Sheeler said of the American relationship to industry: "It may be true that our factories are our substitute for religious experience."⁴⁷

There can be no denying, then, that a romanticization of nature and a concomitant romanticization of industry suffuses Renger-Patzsch's book. But these images bear a third significative structure (beyond their representational and metaphorical functions): Renger-Patzsch insists that objects natural and industrial alike offer a school for seeing. They create fields in which our vision is trained through the interplay of surface and psychology. And this training can hardly be construed as uniformly positive. In each of the images I have discussed thus far, vision is structured and guided, that is, trained to find hidden significance in the mundane and profane. Yet this project, manifest in many images throughout the book, is consistently opposed and obstructed by other rhyming sequences. Renger-Patzsch is intensely concerned with the societal problems that arise as vision attempts its survey of a world dominated by an interlacing of nature and technology. Vision discovers not merely the promise of spiritual renewal but the concrete existence of societal division, liminality, truncation, and entrapment.⁴⁸

The image that best suggests the coexistence of these two modes of vision in the modern world is, at first glance, dangerously "pretty": *Weinbergweg. Ellerer Kapley*. The first image of the third section, it forms a bridge between Renger-Patzsch's human portraits and his landscapes. The photograph captures a path through a vineyard, with rugged hills in the background, a stone wall or terracing on the right. The path, which bends away to the left and becomes narrower, suggests the ancient topos of the Way or path of life, and, in its invitation into the depth of the image, builds on the optical patterns discussed above. But the eye's way into and along the path is, as it were, barred by an absence of light: the vines on the immediate right cast thick, bar-like shadows directly across our path. Each of the succeeding images in the section reinforce this strong sense of truncation and confinement: the photographs depict severely pruned trees that nonetheless obscure our vision of a second row behind them; a jagged, recently hewn stump whose violent truncation is opposed only by a ragged, sharp splinter that juts up

47. To see just how little aestheticized Renger-Patzsch's factory images finally appear, one only has to compare them to Sheeler's series taken at the Ford plant at River Rouge.

48. Simms, emphasizing less the role of a new vision than that of the things themselves, points to a different tension in the book. He finds a decidedly conservative impulse in Renger-Patzsch's fidelity to his objects, a "recentering of the subject, of the nation, and of the world in all its dimensions;" but he argues that this tendency is countered through the emphasis on seriality in industrial products, natural objects, and photographic processes. Simms, "Just Photography," p. 199.

Renger-Patzsch. Entrance Wall. 1928.



defiantly; and the curb of a pool shot from an angle so low that lilies in the water appear totally flattened, a carpet upon which the eye walks toward the concrete border, which then appears to tower above the water and separate the plants from the apparently endless expanse of grass beyond.

As he does with the series of images that guide vision into the shadow space of hidden significance, Renger-Patzsch here suggests that nature and the man-made serve equally to block and frustrate vision in the modern world. This challenge set before a modern optics is nowhere more clear than in the brutality of the image that introduces the representation of industrial sites: *Eingangsmäven*. A blank brick wall takes up the lower two-thirds of the image; it is inscribed with aggressive lettering in a modern style that names the building behind it and describes its function. Only a hydrant in the foreground breaks the massive monotony of our obstructed vision. The joke, of course, is that the thing represented, the wall, is utterly uninteresting, while that which it obscures has an iconic status. The hidden structure is Walter Gropius's first important commission, the Fagus shoe last factory, one of the most famous of all modern buildings and a principal source of the international style. We are not permitted to see the element of the scene that might have offered visual interest and cultural significance, but only the wall and a featureless gray infinity.

These images, which emphasize the manner in which industrial and natural world alike serve as a limit to and truncation of vision, are complemented by other



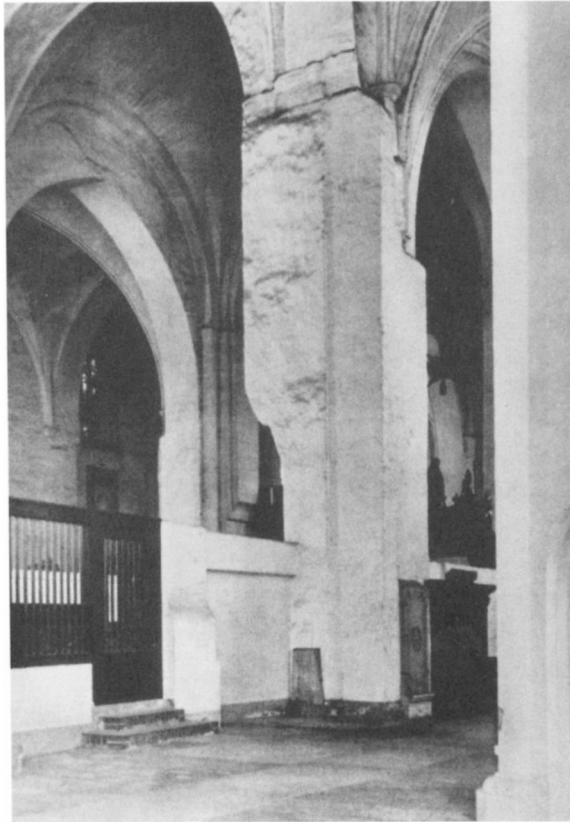
series throughout the book. Primary among these is the repeated figure of enmeshment or entrapment. The theme is first signaled by an early image of a melon tree, whose branches are intertwined in a way suggestive of a cage or a grate; the sense of visual entrapment here is later reinforced by the physical entrapment within the net of a shrimp fisherwoman; and, in the sequence of industrial photographs, several shots taken from below (such as the tracks of a cable car reproduced here) elicit a kind of visual claustrophobia, as the sky is segmented and held away from the viewer.

Just as nature and technology conspire to reveal, in these photographs, repositories of significance and mystery, they work together to raise to the level of consciousness the

ways in which vision, in a modernizing society, is frustrated and turned back upon itself. Renger-Patzsch in fact argues that the present moment is a significant one, even a turning point for the future of human sensory capacities. This point is signaled by one of the most powerful images in the book, yet one that is consistently ignored: an architectural detail of a column in a cathedral, *Blick in den Chor des Lübecker Doms*. It is no accident that the photo comes at a cut between two groups of images: it depicts with great intensity a pillar that has collapsed or been worn away, revealing behind it an expanse of rough stone or plaster. To the left and the right of the pillar rises vaulting that stands out for the smoothness and precision of its material and workmanship. This is precisely the place in the church where the new, technologically advanced Gothic style was built up off of the cruder, more “natural” Romanesque.

At this moment, then, freighted in Renger-Patzsch’s reading with unusual significance, the photography of natural and technological objects reveals them as paths *and* as limit conditions. Far from the presentation of a uniformly beautiful world, *Die Welt ist schön* presents Renger-Patzsch as a moderate whose ambivalent gaze across a vast Weimar landscape all but devoid of humans offers a sobering counterpoint to the technological optimism of so much of the New Photography. Ironically, though, it is Renger-Patzsch, and not the self-conscious followers of Moholy, who undertakes the exploration of the anthropological implications of photography. Renger-Patzsch’s photographs do not merely *register* changes in the

land and in the urban industrial landscape, changes which posed deep-running challenges to human sensory and cognitive capacities. They instead fuse the optical challenges implicit in Moholy's conception of "production" with an intense pre-occupation with the concrete, a dimension almost wholly absent from Moholy's own stringent formalism. Renger-Patzsch's school for seeing thus offers models for the recognition and synthesis of what Canetti calls "what is closest and most concrete" as a psychologically fraught field of vision. That fusion was possible only as a new aesthetic form, the photo-essay; that form arose in a social and political field that shaped it irrevocably.



Renger-Patzsch. View into the Choir of Lübeck Cathedral. 1928.