Visual Histories of the United States. Annual Conference of the Historians in the DGFA (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Amerikastudien/German Association for American Studies)

Veranstalter: Gudrun Löhrer (Freie Universität Berlin); Volker Depkat (Universtität Regensburg); Andre Dechert (Westfälische Wilhelms Universität Münster)
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For its annual conference, the German Association for American Studies (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Amerikastudien, DGFA) invited researchers to critically discuss most recent thematic, methodological and theoretical approaches in the growing academic field of Visual History and to evaluate the use of visual approaches for historical investigations. In their introductory remarks the organizers raised methodological questions. GUDRUN LÖHRER (Berlin) reminded historians who use visual media to avoid ascribing intrinsic evidentiary value to visual material and bear in mind that historical images belong to specific visual cultures and specific historical knowledge compositions that vary in relation to culturally defining factors such as race, class, and gender. VOLKER DEPKAT (Regensburg) added that a clear analytical distinction between Pictorial Studies and Visual Culture Studies as a field that examines the political, social, and cultural contexts of vision was prerequisite. ANDRE DECHERT (Münster) described Reception Theory as a field of research of Visual Culture Studies and Visual History neglected by scholarly attention and characterized by interdisciplinary tensions. He proposed a historical study of reception that proceeds where empirical media studies halt and encouraged historians to draw conclusions about contested reception processes within societies by looking at sources that document the individual reception of images.

KARSTEN FITZ (Passau) showed that visual narratives of the American Revolution were part of nation-building processes in the Early Republic. In the first half of the 19th century the Jeffersonian ideal of the independent, self-reliant farmer as the basis of republican values became central to the establishment of a visual repertoire of the American Revolution, and thus in the creation of a national and cultural American identity. Depictions of Israel Putnam and George Washington as yeomen farmers became legible as personifications of the typical minuteman and helped to turn the yeoman into a national and cultural icon of the *citizen soldier*.

VOLKER DEPKAT talked about the visual dimensions of the invention of the American presidency. He analyzed presidential portraits of the Early Republic as visualizations of abstract values and visual arguments in ongoing debates about legitimacy and authority. By analyzing individual and group portraits of Presidents of the Early Republic and relating them to visual traditions of European monarchy, Depkat carved out three sub-themes in the visualization of their role as keepers of the American Revolution's promises.

UDO HEBEL (Regensburg) examined widely disseminated photographs of U.S. American Presidents such as Lyndon B. Johnson taking the presidential oath of office in 1963 or Barack Obama kneeling on a beach in Louisiana after the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. By closely analyzing their composition and locating them in their cultural and socio-political context, he showed that these photographs that capture „national moments" are located in interpictorial clusters, referring to other iconic photographs of U.S. Presidents as well as U.S.-American traditions of photography, thus deliberately encouraging interpictorial readings.

In her keynote speech, LISA CARTWRIGHT (San Diego) presented her project of a multi-year sensory and visual ethnography on work experience and interaction between humans and technology in farming and ranching life in the State of Kansas, which she has been conducting in collaboration with the photographer Steven Rubin since 2009. In Kansas, wind energy has gradually replaced crop as a mass-produced commodity during the last decade and is harvested through a new energy infrastruc-

ture. The double-cropping of wind and grain has created a technological and topographic infrastructure in which boundaries and intersections are negotiated between the energy industry and agriculture. The project focuses on the process of photographically documenting the interrelation of land crops, wind crops, and their respective technologies and pays special attention to the historical place of landscape photography as a technology of power. Film theory and critical media theory are applied to the analysis of non-filmic visual experiences and are used to interrogate photographic production. From this perspective, the American heartland, a place symbolizing normativity and whiteness, appears as a media landscape that has shaped the regional culture and which has also served historically as the hub of an infrastructure of networks interconnected with a national and global media economy.

JULIA NITZ (Halle/Saale) analyzed the way in which photographic histories at three turning points in American history and memory formation used 19th century photographs of African Americans to represent their role in the American Civil War. Alexander Gardner's „Photographic Sketch Book of the War" (1866) and Francis Trevelyan Miller's „The photographic history of the Civil War in ten volumes" (1911) created the strong and persisting trope of the African American as the ignorant beneficiary of the war. Although in his TV series „The Civil War", first broadcasted in 1990, Ken Burns used photographs of these collections, he managed to challenge prevailing representations by framing familiar photographs in new ways. Nevertheless, as Nitz showed, in all these three periods – the immediate postwar period, the time around the fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of the Civil War and 1990 when the Cold War ended – intensified emphasis was laid on the visual cultivation of the idea of a common cause and effort of the North *and* the South in creating a modern democratic American nation during the Civil War.

MASSIMO PERINELLI (Cologne) suggested that although historical research built on the analysis of moving pictures was growing, works examining films *themselves*, notably feature films, as historical sources were still scarce. Historical film analyses often lacked methodological and theoretical tools to analyze the relation between the fictionality of films and the socio-cultural context of their time of production. He proposed a historical analysis of moving pictures resting on theories of subjectification developed in feminist film studies, affect theory of film or discourse analysis. These perspectives consider the cinema of the 20th century to be a societal apparatus that forms an integral part in processes of the modern western subject's self-constitution. Perinelli suggested a methodological approach that confronts specific discourses of a film with dominant discourses of a certain time by looking at sources that were produced in the surroundings of movies. This approach is practiced by a study group of film and history called „Arbeitsstelle Geschichte und Film", located at the Anglo-American Studies Department of the University of Cologne. Within the frame of its regular seminars on film and history, the group connects students and scholars from history and media studies and wants to acknowledge that historical film analysis requires a methodological and theoretical framework that crosses disciplinary boundaries.

GUDRUN LÖHRER (Berlin) discussed historical health films of the 1940s as part of larger historical visual, public health and medical cultures. Refraining from a simplistic understanding of the genre concept, Löhrer argued that although public health films were integrated in systems of visual and cinematic knowledge, simply grouping them by their shared educational purpose would elide their actual generic features, obstruct the analysis of their aesthetic and affective dimension, and therefore could give no insight into what sense historical target audiences might have made of these film. Using the example of short, melodramatic anti-tuberculosis movies produced by the National Tuberculosis Association as well as short animated cartoons used for the malaria education of soldiers commissioned by the U.S. Army, she examined *laughter* and *heartbreak* as two important generic features of these two different types of public health films. The films addressed their audiences on a visceral level,

hereby inducing agency and desire to be well, and therefore interpellating a self-governing subject prerequisite for the health government of modern societies' populations.

BJÖRN SCHMIDT (Köln) surrounded his analysis of Chinatown-films of the 1910s to the 1930s by a sketch of their surrounding visual discourses, which, as he argued, were based on a *tourist gaze*, a visual form rooted in tourism. When large Chinatowns in U.S. metropolises had become tourist attractions at the turn of the 20th century, Chinatown simultaneously became a popular setting for motion pictures. Understanding visual culture as comprising images and their relation to practices of seeing, technology and visual discourses, he showed that the *tourist gaze* both in and outside the cinema was part of a visual *dispositif* that made visible a supposedly authentic Chinatown. The films insofar formed an important element in the construction of Chinatown and Chinese Americans as opposing hegemonic cultural and racial concepts.

In her keynote talk ANIKO BODROGHKOZY (University of Virginia) elaborated on approaches for analyzing and historicizing the role played by television during the classical network era of the 1950s to the 1980s. Referring to her recent project on the respondence of viewers to TV news coverage of the assassination of John F. Kennedy, she outlined her method of a discursive analysis of historical reception practices. The analysis of viewer mail, surveys, press commentaries and interviews conducted by social scientists showed that for a vast national audience, television played a crucial role in the experience of this event and revealed that viewers were highly conscious of the medium and its underlying conditions of production. Bodroghkozy emphasized that looking at television programs was essential for an understanding of the political, social, and cultural history of the Postwar Era.

HANNO SCHEERER (Trier) talked about Native American reactions to maps and survey marks in the Ohio Valley of the late 18th century. As visual enunciations of power/knowledge complexes, maps manifest power relations by producing scientific knowledge about a place. Nevertheless, Native Americans in the Ohio Valley of the late 1780s and 1790s resorted to their own visual signs of power. In response to U.S. federal land surveying efforts, Native Americans marked trees with images of violent acts against Euro-Americans and attacked survey crews. By taking into account Native American reactions, Scheerer broadenend historical research on the settlement of the Northwest Territory. Native American reactions show that contrary to the traditional historical narrative, after 1787, when the U.S. formally accepted Native American land claims, the territories northwest of the Ohio remained a contested place. Furthermore, even though maps are visual carriers of power, their meanings can be subversive to the power relations they represent and reinforce.

Photographs and photo albums created by US-soldiers during and after their participation in the Philippine-American War (1899-1902) served SILVAN NIEDERMEIER (Rostock) to discuss the role of private photography for an understanding of the visual history of war and colonialism. Drawing on approaches of Subjectivity Studies, Visual History and Postcolonial Studies, he argued that the medium of photography had broadened the colonial visual sphere as it had led to the production of pictures that allowed for multiple and ambiguous readings. Whereas pictures of war and violence clearly indicate the significance of the medium for the production and reification of male imperial subject positions, images of US-soldiers interacting with Philippine civilians transgressed the dynamics and pervasiveness of the colonial gaze as they allowed for Filipino self-representation.

REINHILD KREIS (Augsburg) analyzed the United States Information Agency's (USIA) visual policy of the Cold War. As one of the key photo gathering agencies during that era, since 1953 USIA dependences provided U.S. cultural and political institutions all over the world with textual and visual material to propagate, correct and guide interpretations of official American points of view in foreign societies. In the case of allied societies, the image policy of the USIA served as a soft power strategy that represented the U.S. as a prosperous and strong democratic system in the global Cold War context.

KATHARINA FACKLER (Regensburg) compared photographic representations of poverty in two campaigns that responded to a growing national poverty rate in the 1960s: The War on Poverty of the Johnson Administration and the Poor People's Campaign that in 1967 emerged out of the Civil Rights Movement. Fackler considered the two photographs that she analyzed image events that although their political goals, methods and visual strategies differed, both appear as deliberately staged spectacles, visualizing and mediatizing particular conceptions of the problem of poverty to a mass audience. As it presented a sanitized version of poverty to a middle-class audience, the Johnson Campaign visualized the promises of liberal democracy and served as a containment strategy in the domestic and global Cold War context. However, the pictures taken by Jill Freedman, a photographer who in 1968 documented the Poor People's Campaign protests in Washington D.C., disrupted and transformed this liberal staging of incorporation. She visualized members of socially disenfranchised groups actively bonding across lines of race, class, gender and age, performing participation in political processes. The photographs spatially and ideologically presented poverty as a structural problem, responded to the simplified vision of poverty of the War on Poverty Campaign and transgressed dominant Cold War narratives.

The papers presented at the conference dealt with a variety of visual sources, gave a broad range of impulses and examples for historical analyses of visual material and took multidisciplinary approaches. The contributions of Loehrer, Nitz, Niedermeier, Scheerer, and Schmidt underscored that in relation to their historical context, meanings of visual artefacts always stay ambiguous and disputed. With a section dealing exclusively with motion pictures and contributions on television as an object of study, the conference reacted to the marginalized role that feature films and television still play in the field of Visual History. As Perinelli and Loehrer stressed, motion pictures play a productive part in processes of subjectification and form the very core of the development of modern societies, which is particularly applicable to US-history with its highly developed film industry and cinema culture.

Conference Overview:

Welcome and Introduction: Michael Mayer (Tutzing), Gudrun Löhrer (Berlin), Volker Depkat (Regensburg), Andre Dechert (Münster)

Section I: Visualizing the Nation

Karsten Fitz (Passau): Remembering the Revolution – Constructing the Nation. Visual Narratives of the American Revolution in the Early Republic

Volker Depkat (Regensburg): Personifying the Nation: The Visual Invention of the American Presidency, 1789-1865

Udo Hebel (Regensburg): Retaking National Moments: Interpictoriality and Iconic Photographs of U.S. American Presidents

Keynote I

Lisa Cartwright (San Diego): The Political and Historical Iconicity of the American Landscape

Section II: Strategic Visualizations

Julia Nitz (Halle/Saale): Cultural Adaption of Nineteenth-Century Photographs of Blacks in Civil War Discourse

Section III: American History and Film

Massimo Perinelli (Köln): Film as Source for Writing and Teaching American History

Gudrun Löhrer (Berlin): Engendering „Good Old Fashioned Horse Sense?" Motion Pictures as Educational Ideology

Björn Schmidt (Köln): Seeing Chinatown: The Visuality of Space and the Tourist Gaze in Motion Pictures, 1910s-1930s

Keynote II

Aniko Bodroghkozy (University of Virginia): History – Television –Audiences: The Uses of Historical Audience Reception Studies

Section IV: Imperial Gazes and the Visuality of Space

Hanno Scheerer (Trier): Order Upon the Land:

Native American Reactions towards Maps and Survey Marks as Visual Symbols of Imperial Power in the Northwest Territory, 1782-1795

Silvan Niedermeier (Rostock): Blurry Encounters: Photography, Violence and the Colonial Gaze in the Philippine-American War, 1898-1902

Section V: Visual Politics of the Cold War

Reinhild Kreis (Augsburg): The Image Distributor. The Picture of the United States Information Agency During the Cold War

Katharina Fackler (Regensburg): „I may be poor, but I am somebody": The 1968 Poor People's Campaign in Photographs by Jill Freedman

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