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„In the Labyrinth of Signs - the Influence of mass culture to the people“

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The influence of mass-culture to the people is one of the main themes of my photographic work. I'll show you excerpts of three series with different strategies to reflect the role of the photographic image and his omnipresence in the everyday life.

The imagery, which is spread by the most diverse sorts of media, though especially by the cinema and television, has an immense influence on people. The human images it provides, as well as the idols it constructs have become nothing more but synthetic products, articles for sale which have been carefully tested for their compatibility with the media. Thus, pictures no longer have the mimetic functions of providing a lifelike image of man or of documenting and analysing social reality. Their only sense consists of being ready to be consumed, whereby they become ideals for people. On the one hand, images that provide the individual with the opportunity to borrow an identity at whim are produced. On the other hand, the visual media that are, to some degree, responsible for the decrease of true self-consciousness, by alienating the individual from its real needs create certain types of man as idols. Their imitation gives the security of being part of a broad majority. This mechanism consequently leads to uniformity within society.

Efforts to escape mostly end up in the manufacturing of new images. This imagery has such a great power, that I can hardly consider it apart of real life any more.

The series „People Pictures - Picture People“, I realised between 1986 and 1991 supported by the Otto Steinert-Scholarship of the German Society of Photography (DGPh), is based on this reflections.

By this project I captured situations from every-day-life in my photographs that illustrate the interwovenness of the omnipresent icons of media with our real life. Therefore, I don't understand photography as a means of providing ideas; I rather use its practicability to be able to immediate react to complex actions and to extract stills out of the plenty of sensations that surround us, by still keeping the ambiguity of the depicted.

Within these pictures, reality itself appears as a collage of isolated elements. The myths that are

transmitted via media are imbued with a sense of irony and thereby lose their power.

The pictures were made at mass events with different contentual mottoes. The occasions for the meetings were of religious, political, sportive or simply entertaining nature. However, the events themselves are surprisingly similar to each other, as they are all subjugated to the law of the spectacle. It is not the belief to be able to deal with each aspect of society within a photographic work that makes me juxtapose pictures with such seemingly different themes as a visit of the Pope, carnival, rock festival etc. Rather, I'm interested in exposing the interchangeability of signs. Only then it is possible to gain a more complex perception of a reality that is in danger of getting lost behind the definiteness of the myths of the world of images.

In contrary to the journalistic idea of the decisive moment, when all the elements of a picture work together for a definite message the composition in my photographs connects diverging elements by keeping their own meanings. They don't fit together to one story. The viewer is animated to find his own associations.

The flash used by daylight dissolves the depth of field perspective in favour of an ultracontoured flatness. The hyper-real artificiality, another effect of the flash, supports the idea of the picture as a construction of reality.

The complexity of perception by this work is fixed in the very short moment of the photographing act. The pictures have a character of openness, as chance is deliberately involved into the process of creating.

In the next series „In the Labyrinth of Signs“ I combined fragments of the real every-day-worlds to collages to make signs, materials, surfaces, colours and lines start playing their own game beyond the limitations of the single picture segment.

The enigma's sense is that there is no solution offered. The combination of the picture's elements is not meant to prove any sort of ideology, the interaction of the segments does not stabilise any given sight of the world. The irritation which is caused by the superficially unlogical combination of the fragments enables the viewer to experience familiar rooms and objects of his/her every-day surrounding in a much more sensual way, as they are being disconnected from their purely functional circumstances.

My respect towards the objects makes me not only use them as raw material for subjective pictorial compositions, but also to give them the freedom to develop their own lives within these constructions of reality. Any direct references to the banal reality in these collages work as shields against any kind of presupposed meaningful content. Being liberated from the ultra-meaning of the myth, the things regain their own, inner meaning. Their presentations are not getting ecclesed to become timeless symbols for the human existence. The traces of the present, out of which they are built, are meant to enable the viewer to experience social reality. By getting transparent as incisions in diachrony, the pictures turn themselves against the false nature of every-day-myths.

Strong sections, blurred zones, the emphasising of surfaces and materials are the means by which I create peculiar rooms, which concatenate to become labyrinths.

It expresses the loss of orientation in the impenetrable thicket of our consumption- and media-fixed society.

„What about these pictures is real and what fictitious, what is natural and what constructed?“

This question which permanently attends the viewer, on the one hand evokes a healthy, sceptical distance towards the authenticity of documentary photography, but on the other hand makes him/her resistant against the suggestive effects of pictures that intend to overwhelm by only addressing themselves to emotions.

Being animated by the visual appeal of the combinations of pictures, s/he is encouraged to read the collages, to complete the fragments by means of his/her own imagination and to compare the complex net of formal and contentual connections with his/her own modes of perception.

Pierre Devin, the director of the Centre Régional de la Photographie Nord, Pas de Calais, saw these two series and asked me if I could imagine combining these different strategies in one work about the inauguration of the Eurotunnel.

The challenge of this project for me was to find a way to use the picture - combinations not as an illustration of the theme. It was very important to keep their ambiguity and to create a complex narration on different levels.

By a show in the Museum for Fotokunst in Odense, Danmark, I confronted the series „People Pictures - Picture People“ and „In the Labyrinth of Signs“ and I could realise, that they work well together. The more abstract collages animate the spectator's lust of letting his/her curious look wander across the surface of the whole picture. This way of reading the details of an image let him/her understand the more narrative single pictures as collages of reality too and not as photographs with one journalistic meaning.

In our mass-media culture we are more and more trained to look very quick for the message and at the same time we are losing the understanding of the complex net of cultural, social and political contents. The spectator is always taking the simplest solution you are offering, and for this reason it's very important to create a visual strategy, which is not simple to consume and which provokes an active perception.

For the project about the Eurotunnel I photographed by the inauguration, at the terminals of „Le Shuttle“, by the shelters and the war museums of the 2nd world war, in the two cities at the ends of the tunnel Calais and Folkestone and in the big shopping mall „Cité de l'Europe“.

The title of the project „In the Middle of the Speed“ is related to a quotation of Paul Virilio: „It's a little bit like a wheel and its axis. Then, in the middle of the speed, there is inertia. A new speed is always bound a new inertia.“

The Eurotunnel can be a symbol of this perception of speed. Travelling with „Le Shuttle“ means to move as quick as possible between the Continent and Great Britain, but by travelling you have no changing impressions, because you are fixed in a triple inclusion - the car in the train in the tunnel.

The narrative single pictures are showing constellations of people at the different scenes. By the great celebration of the new European construction they seem to have a minor role. In contrary to the suggested dynamic they look passive. The impression of inertia is to be noticed everywhere.

The fragments of the picture-combinations were taken at the same places and connects in an associative way the different historical, cultural and political aspects.

The horizontal collages create a balance between static, concentrated views on details and the very dynamic effect of the complete combinations in the narrow and panoramic format.

In contrary to the vertical images of the „Labyrinth of Signs“ they have a more narrative nature. The spectator is always constructing a story by reading the pictures from the left to the right. While doing so s/he dips in to the net of the different themes of the series: The banalizing of the voyage, the cosmopolitan standardisation of places, the inauguration as an event with all exchangeable signs of mass-culture and the megamall „Cité de l'Europe“ as a permanent panorama of the continent.

In these three series I have shown my reaction to the omnipresence of pictures in our life. The pure documentary photography wants to escape the effects of the advertising world by still looking for a neutral objective view on the world.

As a member of a generation, which grows up under the total influence of the television, I can't believe in this strategy. I'm playing with the myths of every-day-life in an ironic way and by doing this I make the spectator think about the condition of the contemporary world.