

David Levi Strauss: Photography and Belief • Jörg Colberg: Photography's Neoliberal Realism

'I love photographs.' This declaration frames the closing pages of David Levi Strauss's latest study of photography and its histories, *Photography and Belief*. Strauss's declaration is personal and forthright – even honest. It is also a bit gleeful. 'I *still* love photographs' is how it reads, I love them despite the fact that they are no longer loved by the public. I am not naive, Strauss confirms; nor I am a dupe, seduced by 'fakery' or 'propaganda'. I simply believe in photography – and so, he suggests, should you. This is a tall order, a seemingly unbelievable request; after all, weren't claims for photography's believability swept into the dustbin of history with the celebration of postmodern cynicism and its joyful embrace of doubt? Do they need to be rehabilitated?

A new addition to the 'Ekphrasis' series published by David Zwirner Books, *Photography and Belief* is a slim volume with a very large claim: believing in photography will be our salvation, if not the first act of the next revolution. 'If we do not find a way to believe what we see in images,' Strauss insists, 'we will lose the ability to act socially.' The stakes are high, and they have been, Strauss reminds us, for some time. Hannah Arendt diagnosed the malady in 1951, when she identified it as the origins of totalitarianism. Paraphrasing Arendt, Strauss explains: '[I]f you want to destroy people's ability to resist control, you must destroy the distinction between truth and lies, because if you can't *believe* anything, you can't *act*.'

These days, Arendt's warning has become all too familiar. Over the past few years, it has been invoked continuously as evidence that fascism has officially reappeared in the West. Fortunately, *Photography and Belief* does not read as another checklist for our proto-fascist times. Nestled in this book's tally of the ways in which we are manipulated by 'deepfake' videos and fake news, an account can be found of the necessity to believe, especially in photography. This is not, Strauss argues, because photographs are true; rather, it is because they are social. It is because they still make up the culture in which – through which – we live. Here, Strauss is advancing the argument of his book's key theorist: Vilém Flusser. Writing in the early 1980s about the emergence of our information age, Flusser insisted that the photographic camera was the first black box, the first apparatus of the digital revolution.

Perhaps this is not – or is no longer – an earth-shattering revelation. For Strauss, however, it is everything. It also holds the key to understanding the stakes involved in his desire to believe. The problem framing this book is not the suspension of belief, it is the suspension of a history of photography in which the digital revolution signals not the death of the medium but its apotheosis. *Photography and Belief* resumes this history by rewriting the story of photography's origin. What if, Strauss asks, the Shroud of Turin is the first photograph? Strauss is hardly the first historian of photography to propose this genesis, though for him the novelty of its claim is not that it locates the origin of photography in the 14th century. Instead, in *Photography and Belief*, Strauss rewrites the history of photography that was written through the Shroud in the 1980s, when, for example, on the pages of *October*, Georges Didi-Huberman used it to develop a theory of

photography's indexicality. For Strauss, the Shroud is not a trace, a sign – it is magic. Like other supposedly acheiropoetic images (miraculous religious icons reputedly 'made without hands'), it is something to be believed in.

Photography and Belief dislocates photography from modernity in order to break its burden of truth: the promises of the Enlightenment as well as the promise to dismantle them. Along with the index, modernity and its 'post' lose their ground in these pages, despite the fact that Strauss establishes his new history of photography through an analysis of the writing of Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes. Barthes, too, loved photographs, Strauss reminds us. He found immense pleasure in a photograph's 'prick'. The question remains: will love save us? Will it conquer all, including the multitude of hands that transform – or produce – that magic? In calls for faith (as with allegiances to the index), mediation, the act of making, necessarily drops from the screen. When, it is worth asking, does belief slip into what Barthes called myth? When does it become ideology?

This question is posed by another short book attending to the morass of manipulated images making up contemporary culture: Jörg Colberg's *Photography's Neoliberal Realism*. The fourth volume in the 'Discourse' series published by Mack Books, *Photography's Neoliberal Realism* also takes as its subject renewed obsessions with photography's burden of truth. '[T]he focus on the at times excessive amount of post-production artifice', Colberg writes with regard to work as varied as Annie Leibovitz's *Vogue* covers and Andreas Gursky's museum prints, 'not only misses the point of what a photograph can be or look like, it also precludes discussing these photographs for what they really are, in particular the functions they serve and the messages they channel'. Evidence of fakery is something of a red herring, Colberg intimates. The problem is not that we might believe what we see on the pages of fashion magazines or in the museum, it is that we believe that we are seeing nothing – that there is no message to be seen, to be read or channelled. Engineering this belief is the work of neoliberalism. It provides the freedom to believe that nothing should be other than it is, that the way things are is not only 'good' but necessary.

Photography's Neoliberal Realism reads as a response to, even an updating of, another short book, Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Reviews *AM*333). Published in 2009, in the wake of the financial crisis and the bank bailouts, *Capitalist Realism* attends to the pervasive belief that capitalism 'is the only game in town'. This belief was so pervasive, Fisher argued, that, unlike other ideologies, capitalism runs 'without anyone making a case for it'. It is with this claim that Colberg takes issue, insisting that neoliberalism not only needs its own propaganda but also that the form it takes is 'identical' to Soviet socialist realism. Colberg's critique of Fisher's thesis seems a bit hasty, given Fisher's claim that the essential dimension of Stalinism, the valuing of symbols of achievement over actual achievement, 'can *only* emerge in a late capitalist culture in which images acquire an

autonomous force'. Colberg is not interested in this seeming contradiction. He is interested in why Leibovitz's *Vogue* covers look the way they do. Why do they look so green and blue, so artificial?

The art historian Boris Groys is Colberg's guide. Turning to the pages of Groys's defence of socialist realism, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, Colberg draws out a definition of realism for our neoliberal times. Key here is Groys's claim that socialist realism is 'hieroglyphic' not 'mimetic': it does not aim to represent reality, it aims to be legible to those familiar with its codes. More to the point: it aims to smooth over the 'cracks' in the real made by socialism's alternatives. The hieroglyphic and hagiographic Leibovitz, Colberg argues, serves as an excellent neoliberal veneer. The assumption is that alternatives to capitalism are now present, even if, as Fisher also argues, they still need to be defined.

A few key quotes from Groys's book do a lot of work for Colberg, though, perhaps, not enough. They defuse or confuse the book's main charge, which is not that some photographs 'hail' us just like the realist paintings of the Stalinist era but that the burden of truth is historical. Given this, it is surprising that Colberg makes no mention of the fact that *The Total Art of Stalinism* was first published in 1988, that it was written not just in defence of socialist realism but to debunk canonical and western histories of the Soviet avant-garde at the very moment that the Soviet Union was breaking apart. This history is necessary. It situates the obsession with the burden of truth less in the rise of new digital technologies than in the almost total repression of realism as a viable social or photographic form at the end of the Cold War. This is when Barthes fell in love with photography. Or, to be more exact, it is when the celebration of his expression of love in the pages of *Camera Lucida*, 1980, was stripped of its origins: his writing on the pleasure of messages and codes, of realism, in the 1960s. Historicised thus, the site of Colberg's critique shifts: it is not the photographs or even the photographers, it is the historians who look to the morass of manipulated images for what they could or should be instead of what they are. Without a theory of photographic realism, Colberg suggests, there is a lot of myth and very little mythology.

These slim volumes overstep their bounds. They make vast claims for photographic culture, for both the makers and 'readers' of photography. This is distressing, if only because it seems needed. Both authors insist that the embrace of uncertainty is no longer sufficient – or even that pleasurable. Yet declarations of love for photography should not be understood as a riposte to cynicism. They are a reminder that the fall into the hall of mirrors celebrated in the 1980s was a symptom of neoliberalism not its reality.

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