Photography Illiterates of the Digital Present?

On Digital Visual Literacy and Photobook Research

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The title of this contribution recasts in 2023 Lázló Moholy-Nagy's 1927 prediction for the future of photographic literacy:"[…] der fotografie-unkundige [wird] der analfabet der zukunft sein […]. die fotografie wird in der nächsten periode ein unterrichtsfach wie heute das a b c und das einmaleins sein."[1] Now, a century later, I wonder: Are we still photography illiterates, particularly as we are surrounded by visual material more than ever? Or have we gone through a photographic or visual literacy training in the meantime? As a subject in schools, some of us may have received such a training in art classes or in photo clubs. In college, when studying art history, film studies, or maybe even the theory and history of photography specifically, students receive training in analyzing a photograph's style, framing, composition etc. But these students make up only a small fraction of the broader public, or even just the academic public in the Humanities and also Digital Humanities (DH), which largely deals more with textual data than with visual material. Thus, it came as a surprise to me when I read in Sander Münster and Melissa Terras' 2020 article "The Visual Side of Digital Humanities"[2] that visual DH has a "grounding in visual literacy" (367), considering that Digital Humanities has—like the Humanities in general—until recently focused on "text and related methodologies such as distant reading and macroanalysis" (i3), as Taylor Arnold and Lauren Tilton remark in their article on distant viewing in DH.[3] The idea of a grounding in visual literacy assumes that both creators and users of visual DH projects possess visual literacy as a competency which they utilize for these projects, thus fusing both visual *and* digital literacy. Yet what does visual literacy imply in this context, in which some of the literacy may be taken on by the computer? Are users, including researchers, of these online applications losing their visual literacy in the digital context, and becoming visual illiterates of the digital present? Or is there something to be gained here, particularly for researchers who did not receive formal training in working with visual material?

Visual Literacy Training for Photobook Research

Trained as a scholar of German-language literature in both Germany and the United States, I only began to build my expertise in visual culture during my doctoral studies, starting with film studies and eventually moving on to focus on photography and photobooks in particular. In my research on photobooks of Weimar Germany, I mainly examine works that contain a significant amount of texts, ranging from captions and poems to long-form essays. Despite this quantity of textual elements, photographs also play a significant role in that their relationships with texts and with each other go beyond a mere illustrative function. Trained to work with texts, I perceived the photographs at first only as illustrations—based on my personal experience with reading illustrated magazines—until I realized they are often at odds with the text, sometimes even disrupting it or creating their own visual narratives. Analyzing the photographs, it became clear that not just single photographs and their placement on the page matter, but also their relationships to each other in sequences often spanning more than one or two pages. However, the latter significance only became clear to me once I questioned my visual literacy, which up to this point allowed me to work with single photographs, but not with sequences of photographic material that influence the way the accompanying texts are read and viewed. In order to train my visual literacy and adapt it to the specificity of the photobook medium, I took the unconventional route of cutting up its pages, removing the photos so as to analyze the impact on the text and the page layout. Once the photographs are cut out, their sizes and formats started to stand out more; by putting them next to each other, both their relationships to each other and their differences in genre became clearer. Yet the original text-image relationship did not disappear, as analyzing the text and its references to the photos, or lack thereof, started to clarify the text's role in the photobook. This practice of de-montaging the book highlighted the photos' various relationships to the text and to each other via their absence from the book's pages.
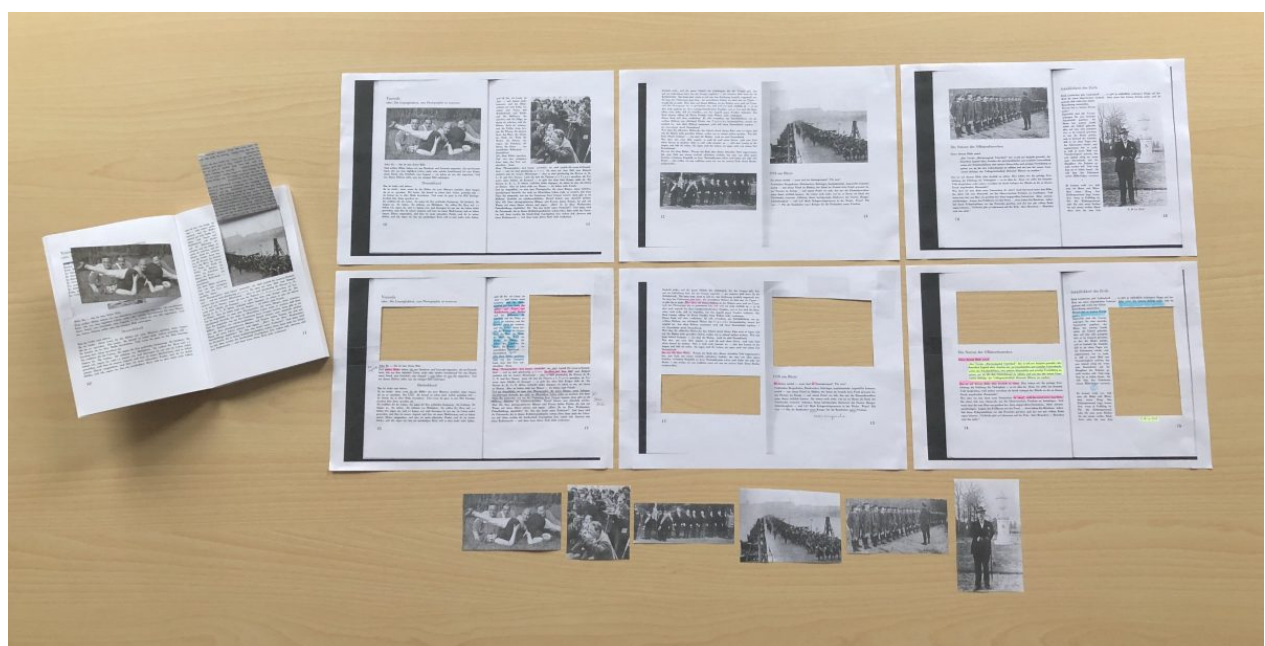

Figure 1. Practice of cutting out the photographs from the first pages of Kurt Tucholsky and John Heartfield's Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles (1929). This act of de-montage makes it possible to shift the focus from the text-image combinations to the photos and texts separately, before returning to examine the original page layout.

Digital Visual Literacy and Photobooks

How did this analogue development of visual literacy also become a digital practice for me? Looking at the cut-up pages on my desk, I turned to the online publishing platform Scalar[4] to preserve this approach in digital form—at least, I thought so at first. After all, digitally removing, re-montaging, and annotating photos in digital scans of the book already seemed to align with and even go one step further than the practice of other digital platforms that offer digitized versions of photobooks. For instance, Josef Chladek, an Austrian web developer, offers selections of double pages from his photobook collection on his site[5]. Other platforms such as arthistoricum.net[6] and the Photoinstitut Bonartes[7] feature scans of photobooks that researchers can download. My Scalar project *Revolutionizing Weimar Germany's Public Sphere*[8] (work in progress) also provides access to the scans of a photobook, in this case *Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles* by Kurt Tucholsky and John Heartfield.[9] In addition, I offer different options to learn about my analysis of the photobook: For instance, users can follow a path in which I guide them step-by-step through the analysis of the book's text-image montage. On a different path, they can discover the elements of the montage with less guidance before eventually encountering my analysis. Both options provide my analytical approach, and, to some extent, give an impression of the visual literacy behind it.

Figure 2. Excerpt from Revolutionizing Weimar Germany's Public Sphere, showing the second step of a step-by-step guide that elaborates on the montage of text and photographs in Tucholsky and Heartfield's Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles.

Yet at first, I did not think of my approach and project as having to do with visual literacy, much less digital visual literacy, which I associated in DH first and foremost with large-scale digital projects that employ distant viewing and rely more on a computer's visual literacy than on a human skill. One example would be the *Photogrammar* project[10] which is based on the archives of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) and the Office of War Information (OWI). Under their direction, 170,000 photographs were taken between 1935 and 1944, capturing everyday life in the US during the Great Depression and WWII. As the project's introduction states, "Photogrammar provides tools to explore this abundant archive," which includes maps that show the photos' locations or a so-called "treemap" which allows users to explore the archive thematically. The latest

design of the project also adds "distant viewing techniques through recommender systems" that filter information based on terms in the photographs' captions in order to suggest to users which content to explore next. Such distant viewing techniques are in general achieved by training the computer's visual literacy to study large collections of visual material, as Arnold and Tilton (both part of the team in charge of the *Photogrammar* project) explain: "Distant viewing is distinguished from other approaches by making explicit the interpretive nature of extracting semantic metadata from images" (i4). To that end, a metadata schema "must be constructed," and "algorithms […] apply the approach at scale" (i4). In short, a computer is able to "view" hundreds and thousands of visual materials, making it a photographic literate of the digital present.

Human Visual Literacy in the Digital Age

Now, what about human visual literacy in the digital age? Or rather human digital visual literacy? Arnold and Tilton also write that a "person looking at a photograph can encode and decode the objects and their meaning in a photography [sic]" (i5)—but can they? In order to not make assumptions about anyone's visual literacy, I return to my own and its deficit when it came to the analysis of various relationships between texts and photographs in photobooks. I certainly gained insights by physically cutting up the book's pages and reordering its elements, but doing so also digitally allowed me to recognize not only that I can preserve this approach more easily online and continue to play with the cut-outs, thus training my literacy; I also realized that this may be a different kind of visual DH—not based on a computer's visual literacy trained to work with large quantities of visual material, but serving me as a researcher to train and refine my visual literacy for the photobook genre. In this way, my approach to the material in my Scalar project is both preserved online and made accessible to others. Plus, at the same time, I am able to continue working with or even playing with the photobook as my research object, trying out various way to "cut up" the work without having to purchase several copies. This approach follows Marcel O'Gorman's call for a "new model of digital humanities that is not just about writing code and making tools for conventional scholarly research" (138).[11] Instead, he "calls on scholars to remain true to their disciplinary interests while acting like artists and engineers, inventing their own critical technological object" (138). In doing so, not only in an analogue and physical but also digital way, I can share my approach with others, while training not just my visual and digital literacy, but, in turn, also my literacy regarding the texts that accompany the photographs in photobooks. Digital literacy in this case is not just learning how to use a platform like Scalar, but also understanding its affordances and limits. One limit, for instance, is that the photobook's physical materiality vanishes when putting it online. Trying to translate it into a digital realm may call for a virtual bookshelf such as the one Chladek offers on his site. This bookshelf gives an impression of a photobook's size via comparison with other works on the shelf. Thus, building one's visual literacy in the digital realm works in two different ways: using and evaluating the digital platform itself, and, in doing so, re-evaluating the object of study, in this case the importance of the photobook's materiality.

While the present digital context may not turn researches and other users into photography literates as predicted by Moholy-Nagy, using digital platforms and understanding visual DH to include close viewings of visual materials on a small scale offer ways to enhance one's visual literacy in a digital realm.

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