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***The Open Book:
Photography and Transparency in the Weimar Republic***

Abstract

This paper will explore how knowledge arises from the interplay of transparency and opacity in photographic books produced during the Weimar Republic. At this time, the book offered photographers a space to test the omniscience of their medium. In his photographic book *Antlitz der Zeit* (1929), August Sander sequenced portraits of Weimar society into a master narrative of human civilization. Albert Renger-Patzsch's *Die Welt ist schön* (1928) demonstrated photography's ability to capture and unify a subject no less extensive than "the world." By arranging images in a book, both Sander and Renger-Patzsch asserted photography's objective and comprehensive display of a subject. Yet the book, as an object and a space of exhibition, also challenged the idea that photographs present their subjects without mediation.

I argue that the book, as theorized in the work of late nineteenth-century French poet Stéphane Mallarmé, played an essential role in photography's conflicted claims to transparency during the Weimar Republic. In 1895 Mallarmé proposed that the concealment of the book's content in its folded leaves was its most distinctive feature. As a result of the "fluttering of its pages," the book resists being totally transparent. The book can therefore be characterized as a space of exhibition that necessarily oscillates between transparency and opacity. The temporal unfolding of images within Weimar photographic books enacted a dynamic of concealing and revealing that complicated an immediate display of the subject, and the photographs assembled in *Antlitz der Zeit* and *Die Welt ist schön* suggest a realm beyond the camera's objective lens.

Zur Person

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