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Towards a photographic criticism.

*[Or, the case of the Berliner Bild-Bericht and the North American grain elevators]*

Abstract

Whilst within architecture the idea of a canon made up of buildings and/or architects is widely accepted, studied, and revisited, this thesis identifies the phenomenon of a ‘photographic canon’ of images of buildings in architecture, constructed and characterised by their repeated dissemination in publications, lectures and exhibitions. Using two exemplar sets of canonical photographs – the Berliner Bild-Bericht prints of Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich’s German Pavilion in Barcelona (1929), and the photo-reproductions of North and South American grain elevators from the late nineteenth century used by Walter Gropius in 1911 and 1913 – this thesis is composed around four key questions: 1. What are the processes, material practices, and relations of power through which this photographic canon is constructed? 2. What alternative photographs, and differencing processes can be identified and how do they draw attention to the normalisation and repetition of the canonical photographs? 3. What is the agency of photography when revisiting these two cases years later? 4. Finally, which research methods and practices reveal, draw attention to, question and disrupt the normalisation of the photographic canons continued repetition?

Though returning to the canon, this study uncovers and makes use of alternative and overlooked photographic material and develops the possibility of ‘photographic criticism’ as a method of interpretation. To do so the thesis considers the photographic image as an object of

different guises, – as a lanternslide (Chapter Three), as a 35mm slide (Chapter Four), as a retouched photograph (Chapter Six), as a photographic wallpaper (Chapter Seven), and as a photographic snapshot (Chapters Eight) – to explore the multiple but specific, unique and singular contexts to which these are mobilised: as ‘drawings,’ as projected images, as large scale exhibitions, as archival images, and the different possibilities these materialisations provide for architectural criticism and interpretation. The thesis establishes new and alternative insights by paying attention to intricate encounters with the material, and by inserting the researcher’s own subjectivity into performative re-interpretations of the various photographic events in which they surfaced. To make these alternatives visible requires new forms of criticism that may be applicable to interpretation of other examples of the photographic canon in art and architecture than the two explored here.