

Photographic Constructions of Rural Magic? Dorothea Lange, Erna Lendvai-Dircksen: Two Careers between Pathos and Propaganda

Ulrich Hägele

During the 1930s, an unprecedented "iconic turn" took place in the media of the United States and Europe. Never before had there been so many illustrated magazines, coffee-table books, and films. The camera had also become an indispensable tool in the anthropological disciplines. Among the most prominent ethnographic photographers of the 1930s were the American Dorothea Lange and the German Erna Lendvai-Dircksen. Both focused their work on individuals and had made their livings in the 1920s by setting up their own portrait studios. Both worked mainly in rural settings – and yet, their photos differ dramatically. Whereas Lange made a name for herself as a pioneer of social documentary photography at the FSA, the Farm Security Administration, Lendvai-Dircksen worked in Nazi Germany, where she was seen as a proponent of *völkische Photographie*, that is, of a photography oriented toward promoting the racist ideology of the Nazi Party. The work of both photographers was used for political purposes, but they describe utterly different models of society. I would like to argue that Dorothea Lange tended to adhere to a religious iconographic tradition. Lendvai-Dircksen, on the other hand, gave her images of the rural a religious and mythological sheen by using several specific elements, which I will describe in a moment. First, I would like to illustrate my view of Lange's work by talking about her famous photo, "Migrant Mother", from 1936.

From an iconographic standpoint, it is easy to see that "Migrant Mother" resonates with the Christian tradition of portrayals of the Virgin Mary, a motif that has its roots in late antiquity. I'd like to compare this photo with one by Lewis Hine, taken in 1905 on Ellis Island: the portrait of an Italian mother sitting before a detention cell with her child. The woman is still wearing the traditional garb of her homeland and a dark head-scarf. The child is looking upward, toward some point outside the range of the photo, just as if it were searching the heavens for deliverance. Compared to Lange's "Migrant Mother", Hine's immigrant is even more obviously set in a religious mode – the headscarves of both protagonists and the triangular composition of the subject point to connections to works that reveal comparable agendas, for example, from the Renaissance.

How is the great popularity of the mother-and-child motif explained? Pierre Bourdieu claims that photographs of mother and child bear a specific symbolism that immediately touches the viewer. He saw photography as a kind of allegorical symbol with a "clear message",¹ identifiable at first sight and legible from within the image itself. Aby Warburg, art historian and co-founder of modern iconology, described this effect by using the term *Pathosformel*, readily recognizable formulas of pathos and emotion. The narrative symbolism of the mother-and-child motif plays on a concept of family firmly anchored in collective consciousness, but without a man in the picture: the family seems to be torn apart.

That is the case with the "Migrant Mother". We are dealing here with a woman, who is obviously completely on her own. This can trigger a protective instinct in the viewer. At the same time, images that generate a high level of empathy, compassion or concern are basically predestined for the media. Sympathy and religious associations are engendered by this image, as well as strategies for explaining the misery and violence shown in the picture. The combination of narrative symbolism and religious connotations make this motif a powerful one for political purposes. Here is an example: At the Salon des Artistes Modernes in Paris, Jean Carlu presented a poster in 1932 with the title "Pour le Désarmement des Nations".² The graphically modified photograph shows the face of a mother screaming in fear, holding her child, in front of an schematic outline of the globe on which the shapes of Europe and Africa can be recognized. Four stylized airplanes in the sky have dropped a huge bomb that falls directly toward the mother's head and while fusing with the "M" in the word "Désarmement". The image on this poster as well as Dorothea Lange's photo of the "Migrant Mother" show mothers in the role of victims. They appeal to the compassion of the viewers. Their origins lie in the tradition of Christian imagery, for example, those of the killing of the firstborn in Bethlehem. The crucial point is that the attractiveness of such images is always immediate, like a reflex in the viewer: if that is what is asked for, they are quickly prepared to open their wallets and give a donation. Roy E. Striker, who was Dorothea Lange's boss, recognized the propagandistic potential of "Migrant Mother". Today you might call it its marketing aspect. The literary critic George P. Elliott said about this photo: "Migrant Mother is famous because influential people, editors and other found it incredibly expressive and pushed for it to be seen in the rest of the world."³ Lange's photo indeed did not disappear into an archive somewhere,

¹ Pierre Bourdieu/Luc Boltansky/Robert Castel/Jean-Claude Chamboredon/Gérard Lagneau/Dominique Schnapper: *Eine illegitime Kunst. Die sozialen Gebrauchsweisen der Photographie*. Frankfurt/M. 1981, p. 2.

² Cf. VU, February 17, 1932, No. 205, p. 223.

³ Quote taken from Robert Coles: *Essay*. In: Dorothea Lange: *Ein Leben für die Fotografie*. New York 1995, p. 20.

but became the icon of Roosevelt's New Deal policy. At the same time, "Migrant Mother" served the purpose of providing conservatives with a justification for spending money for the programs. The photo reached a broad public: it was shown at the World's Fair in New York in 1939 and was published in the new magazines *Time*, *Life* and *Look*, whose millions of readers made the image hugely popular within a short time.

Now I would like to turn to the way Erna Lendvai-Dircksen put a religio-mythical gloss over her pictures. Her most famous work from the 1930s was a large format book of photography on the "*Reichsautobahn*", the famous German freeways, which were built during the Third Reich. For this work she developed a dramaturgy and characteristic layout using the method of visual doubling, that is, constellations of pairs as a row of arguments. On one set of pages there is, for example, a "glacier garden" from "a primordial era" next to the picture of a gnarly tree, with the comment: "You old elm tree, symbol of our ancestors, even the masterful boulevard gave way to you in awe." At the end of the book there are two pairs of pictures which represent an amalgamation of Lendvai-Dicksen's racial-traditionalist viewpoint and a blood-and-soil ideology with religious connotations. They are four pictures of a nameless bridge. In the first pair, one picture shows the bridge from a distance, how it spans a river valley, stretching from one wooded slope to the other. The other shows a close-up of an arch with two double piers made of hewn stone. Unterneath it, a herd of sheep grazes on the meadow. The shepherd is looking toward the camera. In the second pair of photos, the penultimate pair of the book, the river and three arches of the bridge are captured in the foreground, and on the right the bridge itself, placed diagonally in the picture. In the shadow of the huge construction, a farmer plows with a pair of oxen his field in solitude. The visual subject of agriculture and the breeding of livestock, the biblical farming professions, appear under the technological masterpiece. These are confronted on the other side with views of the bridge and the river to be crossed. The water symbolizes here the concept of eternal return: as the original source of life. For the proponents of Aryan-supremacist ideology, running water also stood for the physical act of reproduction of the "poor, emaciated body of the *Volk*".⁴ The ancient building material, the visually seemingly endless row of arches communicate a monumental aesthetic whose origins seem to date back to the Roman Empire. The farmer with his pair of oxen, on the other hand, seems tiny. And finally, the geographic anonymity of the pictures generalizes the image's message. It generates a sense of inevitability, textualized in the continual phrases: "the power of the stony yoke", "massive portals" and "persist now silent

⁴ Erna Lendvai-Dircksen: *Zur Psychologie des Sehens* (1931). In: Wolfgang Kemp (ed.): *Theorie der Fotografie*, Vol. 2. München 1979, pp. 157-162, see S. 160.

and strong through the centuries". Through the doubling effect, Lendvai-Dirksen achieves an intensified image effect and a symbolism that can eventually flow into the suggestiveness of the definitive: the tradition of peasantry, here staged as a common genre motif of folklore, and the modern engineering feat do not exclude one another, but rather mark a "chain of thought"⁵ and metaphor for the "immortality"⁶ of the rural world, synonymous with the claims of an eternal society oriented toward feudal organizational patterns. At the same time, the pictures evoke a pastoral piety as well as liturgical associations, for example in the metaphor of the "little sheep". Text and image are closely intertwined here at the end of the book: "In all great things that grow in the fatherland, we feel the Führer's presence".⁷ These lines are formulated in the manner of a prayer and intend to supply the symbolic and no less blasphemous reference to the biblical creator.

The book "*Reichsautobahn*" was very widely received, also in schools. An elementary school teacher wrote in 1942 in her daily teaching record that she had discussed the building of the Autobahn with her students and as an illustration she drew a picture that could have been an imitation of one of Lendvai-Dirksen's photographs. What you learn in elementary school, you don't forget so quickly. The evasive talk and reactionary theories – such as: at least Hitler got rid of the high unemployment rate by building the Autobahn – is still present today as a positive pattern of identification in the collective memory of some sections of the German population. Thus, Erna Lendvai-Dirksen had a part in the construction of the myth of the Autobahn in postwar Germany. "There can hardly be a greater and more persistent propaganda success imaginable in the history of Nazi Germany than this mixture of fascinating technology, picturesque idyll, and media competence."⁸ In this sense, Erna Lendvai-Dirksen was almost able to achieve her "claim to immortality", at least with regard to her own work. This makes the effect of her pictures of course no less perfidious.

The effect of the "Migrant Mother" by Dorothea Lange also projects into the present. In the 1950s she was already one of the classics of social documentary photography presented at the exhibition "The Family of Man". Her image's message has many layers. With its religious potential, it became an icon of the 20th century and a symbol in American society for progress

⁵ Claudia Gabriele Philipp: Erna Lendvai Dirksen (1883-1962). Verschiedene Möglichkeiten, eine Fotografin zu rezipieren. In: Fotogeschichte 3/1983/7, pp. 39-56, see S. 46.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Erna Lendvai-Dirksen: *Reichsautobahn. Mensch und Werk*. Berlin 1937, no pagination.

⁸ Rolf Sachse 2003, S. 73. Photography volumes devoted to this topic were also published by Wolf Strache: *Reichsautobahn. Mensch und Werk*. Bayreuth 1942 and Herrmann Harz: *Das Erlebnis der Reichsautobahn*. Munich 1942.

and the overcoming of poverty in the drought regions of the Midwest. Lange did not show a rural idyll one wants to hold onto. She presented her model, however, as the victim of meteorological and economic factors and not of the capitalist system. Thus, Lange's photographs were able to have the group in question be presented through medial reproduction altogether in the light of misery. This was tantamount to the stigmatisation of an entire social class, which was able to impress itself onto collective memory by the public presentation of like photos. "Migrant Mother" can, however, also be read as the reminder of a time no one would wish to return.

The woman's name, incidentally, was Florence Thompson. She would have turned 100 this year. An irony of history, perhaps, that a vintage print of "Migrant Mother" was offered at the Paris Fotosalon 2003 for 75 thousand dollars. What would she have done with so much money? Certainly not bought herself a house; even in her old age she lived in a mobile home and probably wouldn't have wanted to trade her mobility for anything.