Acknowledgements

As I am finishing this inspiring and comprehensive process, there are a several people who have contributed to the process that I would like to thank. The ideas that have formed the backbone of this thesis have gradually emerged through reading and thinking and seeing Struth’s photographs, but most importantly through conversations.

Firstly, I would like to thank my tutor, Øivind Storm Bjerke, who has encouraged me with his enormous enthusiasm and insights in the history and theory of photography. He has patiently listened to my thoughts as they have developed during the last twenty four months. But I would also like to thank my advisor at Columbia University, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, who has provided invaluable inspiration and spurred my interest in art history through discussions and through his lectures, not only on the topic of photography, but also on art in general. I would also like to thank Ina Blom, who also patiently guided me during the early phases of this process.

Moreover, I have to thank Elin Sofie Lundby, for generous help with all practical matters involved with finishing this thesis, including preparation of the image-section. Vivienne Moss Kravik has read through the manuscript and corrected my English, for which I am very thankful. Birgitte Lie has looked through the German quotes in this text on a short notice, also a valuable contribution to the finished result.

Lastly I want to thank my friends at the institute; Erik, Erling and Hans Martin, just to name a few, who have made life as a student a pleasurable experience. Most importantly, however, do I owe an enormous dept to Mona Pahle Bjerke, who has supported me in all sorts of ways and has stood by during the entire process, competently at every turn in the development of the manuscript.
# Table of Contents

1. Introduction ...............................................................................................................3  
   1.1. Unconscious Places – Struth’s early street-photographs ..................................3  
   1.2. Literature and method ..................................................................................4  
   1.3. The Chapters ........................................................................................................6  
   1.4. Previous “traumatic” interpretations of realist photography ......................8  

2. The reception of *Strassen* : Avant-garde or (Neo-) Neue Sachlichkeit? ..............17  
   2.1. The reception of Struth’s works: Conceptual art, Neue Sachlichkeit and the  
       “Pictures” generation .......................................................................................17  
   2.2. Becherschool-photography in light of the Conceptual Art movement .............18  
   2.3. Struth and the Becherschool as “Neo- Neue Sachlichkeit” ............................22  
   2.4. The “Pictures” generation ..................................................................................27  
   2.5. Exaggerated objectivity ......................................................................................28  

3. “Classical” representation in photography ..........................................................30  
   3.1. *Strassen* in light of the “Classical episteme” ..............................................30  
   3.2. The Classical episteme .....................................................................................31  
   3.3. The “Modern episteme” ...................................................................................38  

4. Lacan’s theories of vision ......................................................................................42  
   4.1. Trauma in “classical” representation ..............................................................42  
   4.2. The rupture of “geometral” vision ...................................................................46  

5. Perspective ...............................................................................................................52  
   5.1. Perspective in *Strassen* ..................................................................................52  
   5.2. Perspective as Traumatic ..................................................................................56  

6. Repetition .................................................................................................................64  
   6.1. Repetition in the images ....................................................................................65  
   6.2. Repetition as traumatic ......................................................................................66  
   6.3. Trauma as subjective effect ..............................................................................70  

7. Conclusion ...............................................................................................................72  

Bibliography .................................................................................................................74  
   Literature on Struth ..................................................................................................74  
   General Literature ....................................................................................................76  

Illustrations .................................................................................................................. Error! Bookmark not defined.
1. Introduction

1.1. Unconscious Places – Struth’s early street-photographs

In this study I will attempt to interpret Thomas Struth’s early street photographs in the light of Jacques Lacan’s definition of trauma in his seminars “The Unconscious and Repetition” and “Of the Gaze as Objet petit a.”¹ Most of these photographs were exhibited in a show called “Unconscious Places” held at Kunsthalle Bern in 1987, and at the Portikus gallery in Frankfurt the following year. This series is often referred to as Strassen, a term that will also be used in this paper to refer to his images, even though not all of them have the “traumatic” features discussed in this study. The photographs presented in this exhibition show different streets in urban environments, predominantly in Western Europe and New York. The earliest date from 1976 and the latest from the mid eighties. This exhibition marks a transition in Struth’s oeuvre, as he subsequently opted for a more flexible, and less strict, approach to photography, also moving from black and white photography to color. Struth developed this series while studying photography at the art academy in Düsseldorf, under the photographer-couple Bernd and Hilla Becher. Like the works of the Bechers, Struth’s photographs are extremely rigidly and symmetrically composed, and Struth has taken each image from the exact middle of the street, with a horizontal camera angle parallel to the street-axis.

It is precisely the rigid compositions in the photographs, connected to an objectivistic understanding of photographic representation, which creates the traumatic tension in his works, as I see it. This is especially clear against the backdrop of the “post-modern” art-scene of the 1980s and early nineties, where they emerged, that generally tended to conceive photographic representation in much less traditionalistic terms than Struth.

I have borrowed the title from this exhibition for the present study, because it hints that Struth himself intuited an “unconscious” dimension in his works. I will however, challenge the inherent assumption of photographic objectivity, fundamental to his project.²

¹ Lacan, 1981, pp. 17-119. The English translation of these texts by Alan Sheridan as I see it on most accounts covers the meaning of the original French version. I will therefore, aside from a few noted exceptions, refer to this in the following.
² Unless otherwise stated, I will initially use the phrases “objective photography,” “realistic photography” and “traditional photographic representation” in a wide sense to denote photographic images that purport to represent reality directly and “unmediatedly” in one way of another. Through this broad definition of photographic objectivity and realism I do in other words not wish to distinguish between photographic genres, such as “straight photography,” documentary, reportage or “scientific” photography, but point to a way of “reading”
1.2. Literature and method

1.2.1. Theory of trauma

The definition of trauma that will be used in this study is taken from French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s seminars on repetition and “the gaze,” published in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. What makes Lacan’s notion of trauma especially relevant for Struth’s photographs in particular, and visual art in general, is partly that it explicitly relates to the realm of *vision*, or as Lacan puts it, the “scopic regime”, and not imagination in a wider sense, as is the case in Freudian psychoanalysis. These seminars have inspired a wellspring of art historical and critical texts, treating a range of different subjects, including painting, but also films, by critics such as Christian Metz and Laura Mulvey, or popular culture, ideology and even jokes, by the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek. But a Lacan-inspired work that will be especially important as a supplement to Lacan’s own seminars in this study, is the American critic and art historian Hal Foster’s reading of so-called Neo-Avantgarde art in *The Return of the Real*. Most importantly, Foster’s interpretation of Superrealism in this book will form a central reference in the discussion of Struth’s photographs. The extremely detailed works of these realist painters, in my view forms a close parallel to what I see as Struth’s hyper-realistic photographs, and Foster’s traumatic reading of them will provide a model for my interpretation of the works by Struth.

The important advantage with Foster's theory, as opposed to Lacan’s original seminars, is that it is developed explicitly as a theory of *art* and not vision in general, and especially contemporary representational art, which is one of the main topics of Foster’s book. Lacan also addresses art in his seminar on the gaze, but in a very summary fashion, and never directly in relation to contemporary art. He ends his short “art history,” in one of his lectures with expressionist painting, which obviously pre-dates the post-war art that I am concerned with here. Foster, on the other hand, treats a variety of different works by contemporary artists, and by making recourse to his reading of Superrealism, one can solve the important problem of how actually to apply Lacan’s teaching on contemporary art, which obviously entails an important extension of photographic images, within the framework of conventional interpretation. I am here indebted to Roland Barthes’ semiological interpretation of realism, for instance in *Mythologies* or *S/Z* (see Barthes 1972; 1974), but also later work inspired by psychoanalytic theory such as *Le Plaisir du Texte* and *Camera Lucida* (Barthes, 1973; 2001). In chapter two and three, however, I will outline a precise definition of what I see as the philosophical and epistemological underpinnings of Struth’s conception of photographic representation, related to Foucault’s notion of the “Classical episteme.”

---

3 Foster, 1996.
his theory. Furthermore, Foster is an influential critic in his own right, who has written extensively on contemporary art in the light of psychoanalytic theory, and is therefore an important reference regardless of how “correct” his interpretation of Lacan might be.

In Jacques Lacan’s seminars on repetition and the gaze, vision and representation functions to pacify or tame the traumatic within vision, which Lacan refers to as the “real.” Accordingly, the “traumatic” aspects of photographic realism are in this study, briefly, understood as functioning to pacify and repress an underlying traumatic dimension. In *The Return of the Real*, Foster describes how superrealism is “traumatic” through exaggerated attempts to ward off a similar underlying traumatic core: “…sometimes its illusionism is so excessive as to appear anxious – anxious to cover up a traumatic real, but this anxiety cannot help but indicate this real as well.” Here, the traumatic emerges despite what Lacan describes as art’s traditional pacifying function, as well as the artist’s explicit intentions. The emphasis on compositional order and representational transparency in Struth’s works will be seen precisely as such anxious attempts to protect against an underlying trauma. All use of the term “trauma” in this study will refer to the definition given in these seminars. So will phrases like “traumatic interpretation” and “traumatic perspective”, which will be used for the sake of simplicity to refer to my use of it here.

### 1.2.2. Strassen as photographic “Archive”

This thesis was initiated while I was a visiting student at Columbia University in the academic year of 2002-3. My advisor here, Professor Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, has introduced me to several critical perspectives on realistic photography, through his lectures and his writings on the subject of photography, as well as conversations, which have been important for my approach to Struth’s photographs. This includes Walter Benjamin’s critical examination of Neue Sachlichkeit photography, for instance in “A Short History of Photography,” but also Buchloh’s own discussion of the Russian avant-garde’s use of photography in “From Faktura to Factography” to name just a few examples.

But not least am I indebted to Buchloh for his texts on the works of Struth, which are indispensable for the discussion of his images here, even though they are not written from a psychoanalytic perspective. Buchloh has introduced another parameter for the discussion of his photos.

---

7 Another issue is that Lacan’s seminars are written in a difficult style that according to certain commentators actively attempts to resist specific interpretations or closures. See for instance Gollop, 1985 or Schleifer, 1987, concerning this. Relying on Foster’s interpretation of Lacan simplifies the extremely difficult work of providing a consistent theoretical model form his seminars.


9 Foster uses the works by Richard Estes as example, as i shall return to. For an account of Estes works as traditional realism on the level of intention, see Meisel, 1986.

Struth’s images, namely Michel Foucault’s notion of the Archive. He explicitly connects this notion to the images I intend to focus on, in “Thomas Struth’s Archive.” Seeing Struth’s works in the light of Foucault’s notion of the Archive permits not only discovering a connection between Struth’s works and the Neue Sachlichkeit movement, which is a central premise in this study but it also connects them to a wider discursive framework concerning representation and objectivity in western science and philosophy. This “Foucaultian” perspective opens up for the traumatic interpretation of Struth’s works based on Lacan’s theories, which are directed towards a similar model of representation.

Another central text that has inspired interpretation photography in the light of Foucault’s notion of the archive in this study, is Rosalind Krauss’ “Photography’s Discursive Spaces,” which was also initially brought to my attention by Buchloh. I have also been tremendously inspired in my approach to twentieth century art in general by her seminar “Structuralism, Post-structuralism and Modernism” which I attended at Columbia the spring semester, 2003.

I would also like to add that this thesis is not written as a traditional photo-historical study. Even though references to photographers and the history of photography are frequent in the text, the theories used relate as much to art and photography criticism, as their historiography. The goal of the text is not so much to locate Struth’s works within a network of historical references, or historical chains of cause and effect, as to describe a traumatic logic, at work under specific historical circumstances. This logic involves both psychoanalytic and structuralistic theories, as well as art- and photo-historical references. The study sets out to describe an effect, occurring in the encounter with a group of photographs, simultaneously determined by the subject and cultural conventions influencing it. This effect entails that hegemonic conceptions of reality are interrupted as, in Lacan’s terminology, the elusive eye of trauma pierces us with its gaze.

1.3. The Chapters

In chapter two, following this introduction, I will focus on the reception of Strassen, and show how these works are related to two divergent frames of reference, namely Neue Sachlichkeit photography and contemporary avant-garde art. As I will elaborate on in this chapter, I see Struth’s street photographs as a more or less direct continuation of Neue Sachlichkeit photography and the projects of photographers such as Albert Renger-Patzsch and August

\[11\] See Buchloh, 1990.

\[12\] Krauss, 1985b, pp. 131-150.

\[13\] The relation between the “eye” and the “gaze” as described by Lacan, will be discussed specifically in chapters four and five.
Sander. I will at the same time dispute the common assumption that his images are connected to the conceptual art movement and artists connected to the so-called “Pictures” generation, including for instance Cindy Sherman and Jeff Wall. The “conceptual” or neo-avantgarde aspects of Struth’s project in my view in the last analysis have little relevance for his works, as I will show. As I will also indicate, the traumatic tensions in Struth’s project emerge precisely as he revives a traditionalistic photographic idiom within the context of contemporary art.

In chapter three, I will discuss Struth’s photographs in light of Michel Foucault’s notion of the “Classical episteme,” dated roughly from 1650 to 1820. In this way, I will attempt to show that Struth’s photographs, as well as Neue Sachlichkeit photography, can be interpreted in the light of more general perspectives on representation in western thought. At the same time, to the extent that these photographic projects can be connected to the Classical episteme, I will argue that they appear anachronistic, in the context of “modern” art and culture generally. As I shall discuss in chapter four, the “classical” features in Struth’s works will in turn serve to connect them to Lacan’s notion of trauma in the realm of vision, which is developed explicitly as a critique against traditional western models of representation. Lacan introduces the notion of the “gaze,” located outside the subject, making it the object of perception, to complicate and critique traditional models of visuality and the objective gaze of science connected to it, as I will show.

In chapters five and six I will explore how Struth’s images can concretely be related to the notion of trauma developed by Lacan, through their employment of perspective and through their repetitive features, respectively. Chapter five will focus on how perspective, as described in renaissance treaties on this subject and “classical” philosophy, is introduced in Struth’s photographs, and how it can betray traumatic aspects in his images. Here, I will rely on Foster’s “traumatic” interpretations of different twentieth-century art that employs perspective, based on Lacan’s seminars, to provide a “model” for how perspective can implicate trauma in Struth’s images. In chapter six, I will describe how the almost compulsively repetitive aspects of Struth’s photographs can connect them to trauma as described by Lacan in his seminar treating repetition. I will focus on the practically identical nature of Struth’s images, in composition and subject-matter, and how Lacan, in the mentioned seminars connects repetition to trauma. This, as I see it, provides a foundation for a “traumatic” reading of his project.

In chapter seven, the conclusion, I will briefly discuss to what extent the “traumatic” perspective outlined here in relation to Struth’s photographs, can be transferred to other photographic or artistic projects, as well as its relevance for contemporary photographic projects, in the “Becherschool” style, today.
1.4. Previous “traumatic” interpretations of realist photography

1.4.1. August Sander’s Antlitz der Zeit

To my knowledge, this is the first extensive study of Struth’s photographs in the light of psychoanalytic theory. However, there are several precedents for interpreting realistic photography from the vantage point of psychoanalysis. For instance, the American art historian and critic George Baker has made a “traumatic” interpretation of the portrait series Antlitz der Zeit by the photographer connected to the Neue Sachlichkeit movement, August Sander.¹⁴

According to Baker, Sander’s taxonomic survey of the Weimar populace presented in this project opens up for an underlying traumatic dimension through the inclusion of “degenerate” features and social groups, but also through the seemingly compulsive repetition of practically identical photographic compositions.¹⁵ Baker argues furthermore that the general approach of Neue Sachlichkeit photography itself can be linked to the repression of trauma:

“The desire to ward off Unheimlichkeit, [Uncanniness] one could say, becomes the constitutive logic behind Neue Sachlichkeit as a whole: the seamless unity of the Neue Sachlichkeit aesthetic rests upon a seething, chaotic (non-) ground of both historical and psychic confusion. This confusion constantly troubles Neue Sachlichkeit’s archival will to knowledge; the uncanny, that which is precisely “beyond knowledge” (the English meaning of the term), not only frustrates this drive but lies as its motive force.”¹⁶

To the extent one can argue that Struth prolongs the photographic project of the original Neue Sachlichkeit movement, I want to argue that a similar “traumatic” logic can be connected to his works. The German photo-historian and critic Benjamin H. D. Buchloh are among those who have emphasized the strong connection between Struth’s street images and the Neue Sachlichkeit movement.¹⁷ He has at the same time questioned Struth’s claims that his works are connected to the conceptual art movement. Echoing Walter Benjamin’s critique of Neue Sachlichkeit photography in the thirties, Buchloh argues that Struth’s images “fetishize” the surface appearance of objects, creating a false, but seemingly coherent and aesthetically pleasing representation of reality. This, however, fails to highlight underlying, “matterialistic” conflicts

¹⁵ Baker here discusses Sander’s photographs in light of Freud’s definition of trauma in the essay “The Uncanny” from 1919. (See Freud, 2003.) Baker also points to Rosalind Krauss’ “The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism” in describing the traumatic implications of photography, and here as a general reflection on its inherent reliance on repetition. Photography as Krauss points out, “repeats,” in a frozen reflection, a phenomenon as it is reproduced. Photographic representation itself is thereby fundamentally connected to the traumatic. Krauss’ text could therefore be seen as a general perspective underpinning my reading of Struth’s images in light of trauma here. See Krauss, 1985a.
¹⁷ See Buchloh, 1990, p. 5.
governing social spaces such as industrial plants, a popular motif among the Neue Sachlichkeit photographers. For Buchloh, Neue Sachlichkeit photography, and its avatars in contemporary photography – he explicitly mentions the works of Struth and Bernd and Hilla Becher – underpin “ideological” conceptions of reality, smoothing over real social conflicts:

“This anti-modernist legacy of the photography of Neue Sachlichkeit has been inherited and accepted in Thomas Struth’s project as well: it is concretized in his emphasis on traditional photographic craft and perfection, in the insistence on photography’s seemingly “natural” access to a plentitude of transparent and immediate representation of the “real”…It seems that this type of photography cannot bridge the ever-increasing schism between the public spaces of production and consumption and the actual existential conditions of the producers and consumers in those spaces…Whenever photographers…ignore these contradictions it has become instantly apparent that their cameras only reiterate the violent order governing these spaces. The mechanism of alienation to which producers and consumers are systematically subjected is reenacted in their photographic subjection to voyeuristic inspection (that of the photographers and their audiences).”

George Baker, however, criticizes Buchloh’s reading of Neue Sachlichkeit photography for being too deterministic and tightly related to institutional conventions on how to interpret a given motif. Photography, and the subject perceiving it, is given too little agency, as he sees it, to produce interpretations and meaning independently of this. Baker wishes to complicate this discussion by introducing concepts from psychoanalytic theory, which opens for alternative perspectives on photographic interpretation, and how the subject responds to a photographic image. Baker explicitly addresses Buchloh’s discussion of Neue Sachlichkeit photography in this article (and by implication the work of Struth) as an example of the kind of “narrow” photography-critique he wishes to confront and complicate. In that sense, he directly encourages, and provides the basis for, the study I am presenting here.

According to Baker, what is at stake in this alternative approach to photographic interpretation is a more complex notion of subjectivity and how the subject relates to the social spaces surrounding it. His following remarks sums up how I wish to expand on the interpretation of

---

18 Benjamin reproaches the Neue Sachlichkeit movement as follows: “Its motto: the world is beautiful. In it is unmasked photography, which raises every tin can into the realm of the All but cannot grasp any of the human connections that it enters into, and which, even in its most dreamy subject, is more a function of its merchandisability than of its discovery. Because, however, the true face of this photographic creativity is advertising or association; therefore its correct opposite is unmasking and construction.” Benjamin, op. cit., p. 213.

19 Ibid., pp. 7-8.

20 Another critic of Neue Sachlichkeit photography, and specifically Sander’s Antlitz der Zeit-project, that he mentions in this context is Allan Sekula, and his “The Traffic in Photographs,” Art Journal 41, no. 1 (Spring 1981), p. 19.

Struth’s images suggested by Buchloh above:

“What we need is a photographic criticism that does not simply expose the institutional constructs that so constrain and limit the historical subject (and the medium of photography), but one that instead furthers the implications of such a critique and traces the intricate ways in which a subject (and a photograph) maneuvers within this historical field. We need a photographic criticism that is a critique of institutions and a theory of the subject — not the authorial subject, of course, nor the intending subject, but rather the subject in and of photography. Indeed, we need a criticism that imbricates the institutional with the psychological (inasmuch as these two discourses always already constitute each other), and thus comes to articulate the position of the photograph in a historical and social field of forces — forces and drives (narrative and static, symbolic and asymbolic) that are larger than any single subject but are formative of subjectivity (and subjection) in general.”

Compared to Buchloh’s reading of Neue Sachlichkeit photography and Struth’s street images, what is at stake here is the return of the subject in the photographic analysis, and specifically the complex model of subjectivity developed in psychoanalytic theory. This renewed emphasis on the subject comes, as Baker points out, after decades of “post-structuralist” deconstruction of traditional models of subjectivity and proclamations of “Death of the Author,” as well as the ascent “From the Works to the Text” in recent art and theory. Within the psychoanalytic perspective employed in this study, namely Lacan’s seminars treating the traumatic aspects of repetition and visuality, interpretation is torn between ideology and social conventions on the one hand, and the unconscious and the traumatic dimension that can undermine these limitations, on the other. The critical potential of artworks within the perspective developed by Foster and Lacan lies in their ability to break through the moorings of social conventions.

1.4.2. Eugene Atget: Surrealism and Neue Sachlichkeit

Another indication of the traumatic aspects of Neue Sachlichkeit photography, and by implication also Struth’s street photographs, is the curious and paradoxical reception of the works of the French photographer Eugene Atget. These photographs have been related both to

22 Ibid., p. 106.
23 “Death of the Author” and “From Work to Text” are two influential essays by Roland Barthes, printed in Barthes, 1977. Hal Foster also discusses the “return” of the subject in his interpretation of contemporary art in light of psychoanalytic theory. He does not only want to confront traditional interpretations of representational art as implicating a “referent,” but also “postmodernist” art criticism that reduces it hopelessly and irredeemably to “simulacra,” without any foundation in actual reality whatsoever. The “real” that can be evoked in art for Foster, as it is for Lacan, is of course understood in purely emotional and psychoanalytic terms. Foster for instance comments on this in his discussion of Warhol’s works in Foster, 1996, pp. 129-130.
Neue Sachlichkeit photography and the surrealist movement. The surrealist photographer Man Ray, as well as the group's major theoretician, Andre Breton warmly embraced his work.24 At the same time, his pictorial idiom more than anything points to the Neue Sachlichkeit movement that succeeded it, something that has been widely acknowledged in later commentary.25

Furthermore, the interrelationship between the Neue Sachlichkeit movement and Surrealism is commented on by Theodor Adorno who sees a dialectical connection existing between the two movements as contrary reactions to the shock of modern, industrialized life. As he sees it, Surrealism, enacts, or “lives out”, trauma, while the Neue Sachlichkeit movement represses it through compulsively insisting on surface appearance: “Surrealism forms the complement of the Neue Sachlichkeit, or New Objectivity, which came into being at the same time…. [it] gathers up the things the Neue Sachlichkeit denies to human beings; the distortions attest to the violence that prohibition has done to the objects of desire.”26 According to Adorno, the decline of Surrealism starting in the early thirties attests to the success of the Neue Sachlichkeit strategy of repression. But this also implies that Adorno prolongs this dialectic of repression and acting out into the post war era, and thereby paves the way for a “traumatic” reading of contemporary, (neo-) Neue Sachlichkeit works.

Concerning the question of Lacan’s relevance in relation to Struth’s photographs, it is also important that his theories were developed under inspiration from the surrealist movement in the thirties, which according to Adorno developed as a reaction against the Neue Sachlichkeit movement, as mentioned.27 The American art historian Susan Buck-Morss, taking up a cue from Foster in an earlier essay, has commented that Lacan’s notion of the “Mirror-Stage,” which frequently is seen as a precursor to his seminar on the gaze discussed here, was developed precisely as a response to the unifying, synthetic representations of the fascist subject in Nazi art and propaganda being issued in the thirties.28 To the extent Struth’s photographs can be related

---

24 For a contemporary comment on the surrealist aspects of Atget’s works, see Albert Valentin’s “Eugene Atget,” Christopher Phillips (ed.), 1989, pp. 18-23.
25 See for instance Buchloh, op. cit.
28 Buck-Morss goes a step further than Foster, and argues that Lacan’s teaching, and especially his notion of the “Mirror-Stage,” can be seen as a theory of fascism generally, thereby relating Lacan even more firmly to the historical context of continental Europe in the thirties. See Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered,” October Vol. 62 (Autumn, 1992), p. 37. The Mirror-Stage is a phase in the mental development of the child, where it identifies itself seeing its own image in a mirror reflection. This was first described in Lacan’s essay “The Mirror-Stage as Formative of the I Function” from 1936. (See Lacan, 2002, pp. 3-10). The effect of the mirror stage is that it constitutes the subject in a unified image, after it previously had not related to a “self”, other than through fragments. The conception of the self as “whole” and unified, is referred to by Lacan also as the “Imaginary,” and has according to Foster and Buck-Morss, respectively in these two essays, its counterpart in fascist iconography. But it can also be related to realism more generally, and Neue Sachlichkeit photography specifically, that represents reality as coherent and complete, although in less idealizing, ideologically explicit ways than Nazi propaganda. Lacan’s notion of the mirror-stage has important features in common with his critique of representation presented in his seminar on the gaze, treated here. According to this seminar, a similar construction of the subject as image occurs in relation to perspective.
to Neue Sachlichkeit photography, Lacan’s theories is relevant to them, as they are addressed at least in part to the pictorial idiom he is working within. (The link between fascist or Nazi propaganda and Neue Sachlichkeit lay in style, and not necessarily in contents; August Sander’s *Antlitz der Zeit*, for instance, was seen as “degenerate” by the Nazis, due to what they saw as its “radical” subject-matter). 29

1.4.3. A specifically German trauma?

Benjamin Buchloh has since the mid-nineties written extensively on German art in light of psychoanalytic theory. Specifically, he has addressed how war-trauma, as an underlying, repressed factor, has determined cultural production in this country after the Second World War. 30 What particularly characterizes German art and culture in this period, according to him, is guilt complexes ensuing from what he sees as an almost total denial of mourning. Buchloh describes this in general terms that open up for concrete studies of a wide spectrum of different cultural and artistic practices in post-war Germany:

“How could the condition of an almost complete repression of the memory of having inflicted the holocaust and the devastation of war on a geopolitical and cultural formation previously considered the “bourgeois humanist civilization” of the European continent not affect the definition and the practices of postwar cultural production in that country [Germany]?” 31

In an article written a couple of years earlier on the German artist Gerhard Richter, who incidentally was Struth’s teacher at the art academy in Düsseldorf before he turned to photography, Buchloh makes the following statement, pointing in the same direction:

“It is well known by now, of course, that it was precisely the avoidance of a process of mourning and of historical insight that drove postwar Germans to an avid, almost desperate reception of international, and for the most part American, neo avant-garde culture.” 32

As Buchloh suggests here, German artists’ orientation towards the American art scene in the decades following the war, can be related to the avoidance of mourning and trauma. Even though

29 This is discussed by Baker in Baker, op. cit.
30 Buchloh’s text on the street-photographs by Struth, from 1990, was written before most of the texts treating German art from a psychoanalytic or traumatic perspective. He comments on this change of focus in the preface to a recent anthology of his works – see Buchloh, 2000. As mentioned, he has not discussed Struth’s images from this theoretical vantage point.
31 ibid., p. xx.
I will argue that Struth furthers an artistic tradition originating before the war, namely Neue Sachlichkeit photography, the perspectives sketched out by Buchloh here substantiate, as I see it, a “traumatic” interpretation of his works. The complete emotional neutrality or even detachment, for instance in Struth’s works showing German or continental architecture, is perfectly consistent with Buchloh’s hypothesis that repression of historical memory is a determining factor in German post-war culture. Buchloh’s statements also open up for a critical revaluation of Struth’s frequent references to conceptual art, or other international avant-garde movements, in relation to his works.

In yet another text, Buchloh suggests a traumatic reading of the work of Struth’s photography teachers at the Düsseldorf art academy, Bernd and Hilla Becher, showing industrial architecture from the turn of the century, in an objective, Neue Sachlichkeit-inspired style. In light of the striking similarities between the Strassen series and the works of the Bechers, Buchloh’s remarks here pave the way for a similar “traumatic” reading of Struth’s works:

“… what is excluded (either forgotten or repressed) contributes significantly to our understanding of the meaning of each work…The aspect of industrial production that reached horrific proportions in German history between Neue Sachlichkeit and the reconstruction era of the 1960’s was … left out: the industrialization of death in concentration camps…The Bechers may have consciously associated their work with those hopes for postwar reconstruction… Yet however much they did so, the suppressed forms of the gas oven and the concentration camp tower reappear, even in harmless, beautifully-functional brick kilns and pitheads (photographed in a functional way, of course): oven and tower represent a chapter in German industrial history that simply cannot be forgotten.”

Even though Struth’s images have different subject-matter than the works of the Bechers, the repetitive and impersonal photographic treatment of the motif is the same. Also Struth’s urban motifs implicitly recall historical events connected to these places, such as the war. The cultural and historical context of these motifs is more or less the same as in the Bechers’ works. Also in relation to Bernd and Hilla Becher’s work, Buchloh specifically discusses the absence of mourning in German post-war cultural production, which paradoxically produces traumatic tensions in artworks from this period:

---

“…the melancholy of the Bechers’ monumental archive, which arose from a compulsive repetition that filled the space left by mourning unaccomplished, thus itself becomes a mark of German postwar reconstruction culture. Neither the paradigm of Neue Sachlichkeit photography nor the paradigm that lay behind it – industrial production as the framework for avant-garde culture prior to 1933 – could be reactivated in postwar German art. Their place was taken by the archive of compulsive repetition, an expression of the refusal to acknowledge the loss of those paradigms, just as the sine qua non of the German postwar reconstruction was the failure to mourn.”

That compulsive repetition can be connected to trauma is a topic that is relevant for Struth’s works as well, as I shall return to in chapter six.

The traumatic “shock” referred to by Adorno in the earlier part of this chapter, was thought to result from the explosive impact of modern, industrialized life in general. But Buchloh suggests that there is a specifically German trauma, namely the failure to mourn. Interestingly, the wish to escape from a climate of guilt and mourning in Germany is a recurring theme in statements by Struth concerning his development as an artist. As I see it, this underpins an interpretation of his photographic work as repression of, or at least attempts to escape from, historical memory. In an interview with the head of the photography department at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, Maria Morris Hambourg, he expresses the joy he felt when receiving, as a young artist, a photo-book with images from New York, showing happy, carefree people of different races, which he later used as motifs for his first paintings:

“The energy and the autonomy of the people, also reflected in the cacophony of specific architectures, emitted a liberating sense of air that contrasted sharply with the angst enervation and decimation of postwar Germany.”

As Hambourg comments:

“…The artist’s attraction to the life flowering in New York’s streets was symptomatic of the struggle that he, fellow art students Thomas Schütte and Reinhard Mucha and other of his generation, made to escape the atmosphere of repression and stagnation they attached to their parents generation…‘Pop Art looked like the future’…For a young

---

35 Buchloh, op. cit., p. 57.
36 Walter Benjamin has also pointed out the importance of shock as a determining factor in the experience of modern culture and life generally in numerous works, but in relation to photography, perhaps most emphatically in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin, 1968, pp. 217-65.
37 In “Divided Memory and Post-Traditional Identity: Gerhard Richter’s Work of Mourning,” (complete ref.; n32) Buchloh suggests another specifically German traumatic experience, namely the loss and fall of the “father figure” Hitler, whose face had been omnipresent in German society for twelve years, from 1933 to 1945.
German artist trying to escape the paralytic anguish of the preceding generations, the paintings of Warhol, Lichtenstein, Polke, and Richter were an enormous relief: their emotional distance and detachment were preferable to introspective soul-searching, as were their outward focus and embrace of contemporary culture and the social scene.”\textsuperscript{39}
1.4.4. *Explicit psychoanalytic references in Struth’s works*

Yet another issue that supports this interpretation of Struth’s images in light of psychoanalytic theory is his own explicit interest in these topics, in relation to his own photographic works. This is, as mentioned, evident in the exhibition-title “Unconscious Places,” whereby Struth himself connects a psychoanalytic perspective to these at first sight clinical and “objective” photographs. Furthermore, Struth’s second series, which he began a few years after he had initiated *Strassen*, his portrait-series, developed directly from a collaboration with the psychiatrist Ingo Hartmann who used his client’s family photographs as part of the analytic treatment. Even though Struth’s street images and portraits were explicitly developed from his interest in psychoanalysis, this is not reflected in what as of yet is written on his work. This, in turn aligns this study, if not with the artist’s intention (I am speaking here of the street-photographs) at least with how he subsequently came to interpret his own photographs.

Struth, furthermore, points out that he intends to provoke the beholder, in front of his street-images, to project subjective images onto the photographs, thereby to some extent interrupting the photographic objectivity. As he himself puts it: “By withholding the representation of individuals in my photographs I transform the normal relationships of the spectator to the photograph. Empty streets are like stage sets for me. And one can imagine the actors.”

Even though the “traumatic” reading presented in this study in fact can throw light on some of Struth’s own comments related to his own works, as this one, Struth seems to retain a traditional notion of photographic objectivity. In the traumatic perspective outlined in this study, however, a fundamental questioning of the photographic representation as such is a central component.

---

40 The quote is taken from Buchloh, 1990, p. 9.
2. The reception of Strassen: Avant-garde or (Neo-) Neue Sachlichkeit?

2.1. The reception of Struth’s works: Conceptual art, Neue Sachlichkeit and the “Pictures” generation

Taking into consideration the historical context and artistic climate Struth’s images emerged out of in the late seventies and early eighties, is important for grasping what I see as the traumatic tensions in his works. Therefore I will now briefly comment on how his photographs relate to important trends in contemporary art employing photography that his works are frequently related to. Specifically, I want to discuss the works of two generations of neo-avantgarde artists employing photography that Struth’s work is frequently related to. The first is the conceptual art movement, and especially the photographic work of artists such as Dan Graham and Edward Ruscha, who in the sixties were important innovators in the use of photography. But Struth’s work has also been related to avant-garde artists using photography from his own generation, such as Cindy Sherman and Jeff Wall, who contributed to a current of innovative photographic practice beginning in the late seventies, approximately when Struth initiated Strassen.

What I want to suggest, however, is that Struth’s works differ profoundly from these projects, most importantly in conceiving photography as an objective representational medium. To the extent one sees his works in light of this inherent assumption, they most of all recall the photographic projects associated with the Neue Sachlichkeit movement, as I will also argue in this chapter. It is to the extent that Struth’s works appear as traditional objective photographs that they produce “traumatic” tensions, as they emerge within the context of contemporary art.

My criticism of the “conceptual” reception of Struth’s works can also to some extent be brought to bear on other photographers that have studied under the Becher couple such as Thomas Ruff, Andreas Gursky and Candida Höfer, to mention only a few of the most successful artists to come out of this “school.” The term “conceptualism” was connected to the works of Becher-couple in the early seventies, forming a precedent for the reception of their students. To the extent that Struth has been related to the Becherschool “movement,” it seems relevant also to discuss the reception of the “school” as such, and specifically the works of Bernd and Hilla Becher. Seeing
how they have been interpreted in the light of conceptual art photography is important for understanding how his works were initially interpreted, as some of the first examples of “Becherschool” photography.

2.2. Becherschool-photography in light of the Conceptual Art movement

2.2.1. Conceptual aspects in the works of Struth.

From Struth’s own statements, it seems evident that he himself sees a connection between his own works and works produced by the so-called conceptual artists. For instance, he has emphasized the connection between his works and popular culture in terms that recall the photographic projects of certain of the conceptual artists. Benjamin Buchloh and Jeff Wall, two significant historians of the use of photography within the conceptual movement, precisely highlights that its proponents attempted to challenge or critique traditional artistic conventions and modes of distribution by introducing elements from mass culture. In *Homes for America*, one of the pioneering conceptual projects involving photography, the American artist Dan Graham for instance printed photographs of suburban residential houses, significantly resembling Donald Judd’s by then famous minimal sculptures, as part of a magazine article. According to Graham this was an attempt to exploit the mass cultural connotation of photography and negate traditional “artistic” categories:

”I wanted to make a ”Pop” Art which was more literally disposable…could not be reproduced or exhibited in a gallery/museum, and I wanted to make a further reduction of the ”Minimal” object to a not necessarily aesthetic two-dimensional form (which was not painting or drawing): printed matter which is mass reproduced and mass disposable information. Putting it in magazine pages meant that it also could be “read” in juxtaposition to the usual second-hand art criticism, reviews, reproductions in the rest of the magazine and would form a critique of the functioning of the magazine (In relation to the gallery structure).”

In a somewhat similar vein, Struth also underlines that his works are tied to popular photographic genres such as family photographs, snapshots, commercial photography, rather than necessarily

---

41 See for instance Struth’s comments about his works in Hambourg and Eklund, op cit.
43 This statement is taken from a letter to Benjamin Buchloh, printed in “Moments of History in the Work of Dan Graham,” Buchloh, 2000, p. 190.
traditional architectural or fine-art photography. Whether Struth actually aligns his work with these non-art strategies is questionable, however, since his works retain “artistic” qualities, not only in his street-photographs, but even more in later series, such as his family portraits, and so-called “Museum images,” predominantly showing artworks in galleries and churches including audiences looking at them. But even in Strassen, which lacks the visual opulence of his later works, he is more in compliance with traditional criteria for objective photography than artists such as Graham.

Another central notion in many conceptual artists’ use of photography, that resonates in Struth’s and others’ statements about his works, is “deskilling.” Edward Ruscha’s photographic works are good examples of this, for instance Twenty Four Gasoline Stations, a project which is systematically drained of traditional artistic qualities, both in the choice of motif and in photographic execution. In this project the artist has attempted to replace traditional artistic qualities with amateurish and “mechanical” execution. The extremely impersonal and methodical approach in Struth’s street photographs – that he follows a pre-determined plan in taking each photograph – could perhaps be understood as a similar “deskilled” approach. In the works of one of the founders of the conceptual art movement, Sol LeWitt, the repetition or execution of a pre-determined set of artistic actions implied that the artwork itself was given less importance:

“In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.”

Struth points out that he seeks to erase the presence of the photographer from the image, or render it completely “neutral”, through the emphasis on method, thereby to some extent adopt the strategies of these conceptual artists. Andy Warhol, traditionally linked to the Pop-art movement, but who shared many of the interests of the conceptual artists, made a portrait series using a Photomat machine, challenging traditional portrait photography by literally mechanizing all aspects of the photographic process. But upon closer examination, compared with these artists, Struth seems to be far too preoccupied with actually representing and analyzing the motif to comply with the “deskilling” imperatives of the conceptual artists. Where the conceptual artists

---

44 Struth states as much in an interview with Buchloh in Buchloh and Struth, 1990, p. 36.
45 The importance of this aspect of conceptualism has been underlined by Benjamin Buchloh in, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969...”
47 See for instance interview with Reust, op. cit., p. 152.
48 Buchloh, in an interview with Struth, comments on this. Buchloh and Struth, op. cit., p. 35.
deliberately ignored the technical aspects of photography, the photographic \textit{métier} ultimately remains at the core of Struth’s approach to photography, despite what can appear as conceptual features in his works.\textsuperscript{49}

\subsection*{2.2.2. Hans-Peter Feldman’s conceptual photographs in relation to \textit{Strassen}.}

Interestingly, and according to Struth by complete accident, there exists a photographic project almost identical to \textit{Strassen}, made by the German artist Hans-Peter Feldman a few years before Struth commenced this series, which highlights the traditionalistic aspects of Struth’s photographs.\textsuperscript{50} These photographs, called \textit{9 Bilder}, made in the early seventies, like Struth’s works show streets in Düsseldorf, photographed from the exact middle of the streets. Also in Feldman’s work, these images are presented serially. He even displayed them in precisely the same way as Struth did on at least one occasion (and as the Bechers continue to do to this day in their “typological” works): mounted in groups of at least nine, on the wall in a grid pattern.\textsuperscript{51}

Even though the parallel is striking, Feldman has a different approach to photography than Struth, and does a variety of other types of artworks in addition to photography, including a wide variety of readymade objects. By and large, nor does the media appear to be important in Feldman’s work. Upon closer examination Struth’s photographs appear more delicate and professionally made than Feldman’s technically amateurish work. Feldman’s work is not documentary, and does not function as an archival project, as is the case with Struth’s works, but appears more as empty gestures, parodying conventional documentary photography. At the core of the conceptual art movement and its employment of photography lay a strong resentment towards traditional genres and conventions for artistic production, including traditional notions of photographic representation. Struth’s faith in photographic objectivity and his formally conservative approach is difficult to reconcile with the aims of this movement. The subtle differences between his and Feldman’s projects indicate a profound discrepancy in the conception of photographic representation.

\subsection*{2.2.3. The Bechers as conceptual artists}

\textsuperscript{49} In the catalogue text accompanying the influential exhibition \textit{New Topographics} at the International Museum of Photography in Rochester N.Y., William Jenkins suggest the fundamental differences between the objective photographs of, in this case Bernd and Hilla Becher, and Ruscha’s conceptualist photographs. These differences, as I see it, also apply to the relation between Struth’s photographs and conceptual photography. As he says “The pictures [by Ruscha] were stripped of any artistic frills and reduced to an essentially topographic state … eschewing entirely the aspects of beauty, emotion and opinion…There is an obvious visual link between Ruscha’s work and the pictures shown here [by the Bechers]. Both functions with a minimum of inflection in the sense that the photographers’ influence on the look of the subject is minimal…Yet there remains an essential and significant difference…Ruscha’s pictures of gasoline stations are not about gasoline stations but about a set of aesthetic issues.” William Jenkins, introduction to ex. cat. \textit{New Topographies – Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape}. Rochester, New York: International Museum of Photography, George Eastman House, 1975, p. 5.

\textsuperscript{50} Concerning Struth’s knowledge of this project, see his statement referred by Maria Morris Hambourg in Hambourg and Eklund, op. cit., p. 165, n15. Here, she also points out that Struth was not familiar with the work of the Bechers either, when he initiated \textit{Strassen}.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
As mentioned, most of the works of the so-called Becherschool photographers and the Becher couple themselves have often been related to conceptual art. Most of these photographers have at least at one point employed the “objective” style characteristic of the Bechers’ works. A crucial issue in relation to this is to what extent the initial interpretation of the Bechers’ works in light of conceptual art in the early seventies determined what I see as the misleading “conceptual” reception of their students’ works.

The American artist Carl Andre wrote a text on the work of the Bechers in the December edition of *Artforum* in 1972, which is frequently used as a reference for a “conceptual” reading of their works in other contexts.\(^52\) The historical significance of this text is heightened by the fact that Andre, along with Sol LeWitt, was among the first to introduce the Bechers’ work on the New York art scene, after having seen their works in Düsseldorf.\(^53\) It was the extreme systematicity and the taxonomic aspect of the Bechers' work that mostly interested Andre in this article. This of course reflects his own artistic interests as a minimal artist, working serially with more or less identical geometrical elements. Descriptions of the intricacies of the Bechers' system take up the majority of Andre’s relatively short text, and the following quote is typical in that respect:

“A partial catalogue of the typological subjects of Bernd and Hilla Becher includes: structures with the same function (all water tower); structures with the same function, but with different shapes (spherical, cylindrical, and conical water towers); structures with the same function and shape, but built with different materials (steel, cement, wood, brick, or some combination such as wood and steel); structures with the same function shape and materials; comparative perspective views of ore and coal preparation plants; comparative frontal views of pithead towers; comparative and perspective views of pithead towers, high tension electrical pylons, blast furnaces, and factory buildings.”\(^54\)

Even though systematicity and order are important elements in the Bechers’ works, this in their own view is connected to objective photographic representation, an aspect of the Bechers’ works Andre neglects to highlight. What this article also downplays is the fact that the works of the Bechers emerge from a photographic tradition that directly opposes the basic tenets of the conceptual movement, namely the Neue Sachlichkeit movement.

A part of the explanation for the close ties between the Bechers and the conceptual artists is undoubtedly the latter’s interest in the Bechers’ works, an attitude which was representative for


\(^{53}\) Bernd Becher comments on this in an interview with Ulf Erdmann Ziegler, “The Becher’s Industrial Lexicon,” *Art in America*, June, 2002, pp. 93-100 and 140-143.

the American art community in general. Furthermore, this contrasted sharply with the Bechers’ German colleagues, who generally found their works disappointingly “artless.” The Bechers have in fact expressed that they felt quite isolated in Germany where the photographic community still preferred the Pictorialist style of photographers such as Otto Steinert.

2.3. Struth and the Becherschool as “Neo- Neue Sachlichkeit”

2.3.1. Struth as Objective photographer

Neue Sachlichkeit photography is another frequent reference in texts written on Struth’s works. Rarely, however, is the contradiction involved in relating his works to both conceptual art and this movement discussed. As I see it, Struth’s traditional conception of photographic representation decisively distinguishes his works from the conceptual artists, and aligns his works inextricably with the Neue Sachlichkeit tradition, despite what can appear as “conceptual” features in them.

The following statement by Struth sheds light on his conception of photographic representation:

“For me, making a photograph is mostly an intellectual process of understanding people or cities and their historical and phenomenological connections. At that point the photograph is almost made, and all that remains is the mechanical process.”

In other words, photographic representation is not as such seen as determined by ideological or cultural conventions. This marks a significant difference from how most conceptual artists conceived photography, precisely as connected to specific culturally defined conventions and practices. Another aspect of his approach is expressed somewhat later in the same interview:

“…therein lies the task of the photographer, practically like a surgeon, to reveal and to preserve the essential structure and type of these historical phenomena.”

The emphasis on “structures” and “types,” thought to be inherent in reality, and accessible through photographic representation, indicates a connection to Neue Sachlichkeit photography not only on the level of photographic style but also concerning the conception of photographic representation. Both Struth and the Neue Sachlichkeit photographers imply that photography is

55 The Bechers comment on their relationships with German and American artists in Ziegler, op. cit. p. 99.
56 Ibid.
57 Buchloh and Struth, 1990, p. 32.
58 Ibid., p. 34.
capable of revealing and representing structures presumed to be essential or fundamental in reality. Secondly, which is closely tied to this, the photographer is seen as occupying a completely “neutral” position, ensuring photographic objectivity. The photographer merely records what is already present or manifest in the world. The metaphor of the surgeon is also interesting, because it highlights the scientific aspect of Struth’s project, which also recalls the attitude of the Neue Sachlichkeit photographers.

2.3.2. Renger-Patzsch and the tradition of “objective” photography

The clear and distinct pictorial style of Neue Sachlichkeit photography is connected by its proponents to a search for fundamental structures subtending or pertaining to reality. Vision, aided by the photographic camera provides privileged access to these structures. Albert Renger-Patzsch, the main figure among the Neue Sachlichkeit photographers states that “… in taking a photograph… We recognize the basic elements of form … and we sense unchanging laws, so fixed that they cannot be expressed in rational terms.”

Renger-Patzsch, like many of his contemporaries, photographed industry and mass produced commodities, as well as nature, and the “unchanging laws” referred to in this quotation were presumed to be inherent in all of these phenomena. However, there was also an explicitly artistic side to Neue Sachlichkeit photography, but this was intimately tied to photography’s ability to provide realistic representations. The title of one of Renger-Patzsch’ most famous books, The World is Beautiful, which has become a sort of catch phrase for the movement as a whole, indicates the “aesthetic” interests of these photographers. Renger-Patzsch explains as follows:

"The secret of a good photograph – which, like a work of art, can have aesthetic qualities – is its realism… Let us therefore leave art to artists and endeavor to create, with the means peculiar to photography and without borrowing from art, photographs which will last because of their photographic qualities."

The Neue Sachlichkeit movement emerged around 1920 as a reaction against Pictorialist photography that attempted to introduce aesthetic standards from painting into photography, and that had become dominant in Germany and the United States during the first decades of the
In the face of the more “aestheticist” Pictorialist photography, Renger-Patzsch underlines what he sees as photography’s foremost function, namely to represent reality, thereby reconnecting photographic “art” to what was seen as its traditional function.\textsuperscript{63}

The works of August Sander, and especially his unfinished project \textit{Antlitz der Zeit}, are instructive examples of the quasi-scientific aspirations of the Neue Sachlichkeit photographers, and their faith in photography’s ability to represent essential structures governing reality. Like other Neue Sachlichkeit photographers, Sander does not only attempt to make clear and distinct depictions of details on the surfaces of objects, but also attempts to forefront the structure he sees as governing the motifs, through a series of photographs. In \textit{Antlitz der Zeit}, Sander attempted to map the entire social fabric of the Weimar Republic, involving all groups of the population from farmers to aristocrats, artists, craftsmen such as masons, chimneysweepers and bakers, but also groups such as vagabonds and the unemployed. According to Buchloh, he bases his project on the medieval model of guilds or \textit{Ständegesellschaft}, which involves a fixed hierarchical system of social types founded in German history and tradition.\textsuperscript{64} Sander attempts to highlight the overall structure that emerges from the series in its entirety. Neue Sachlichkeit photography as a whole, as its proponents see it, aims to uncover underlying structures, more than accidental details in the surface of objects.

\textbf{2.3.3. The Bechers as Neue Sachlichkeit photographers}

Judging both from their own statements and their photographic works, it seems like the Bechers, if anything, radicalized the intentions of the original Neue Sachlichkeit photographers, in their serial photographs of industrial architecture, that they began in the late fifties. Their search for what they call “typological” features in industrial architecture, through juxtaposing images of similar structures echoes Renger-Patzsch’ pursuit of “unchanging laws” and Sander’s essentialist attempt to represent social “types.” The pursuit of objective representation in the work of the original Neue Sachlichkeit photographers, returned in the work of the Becher couple, however, as an obsession. The Bechers’ photographs are even more rigid and systematic than the works of Renger-Patzsch and Sander, not only because they repeat almost identical compositions in a corpus of works produced over a period of almost fifty years but also because they exclusively concentrated on a single subject-matter, namely industrial architecture. Renger-Patzsch and


\textsuperscript{64} See Buchloh, 1990, p. 6.
Sander worked with more varied subject matter, and had a less rigid and deadpan approach to their motifs.\(^{65}\)

As the Bechers have stated recently, their objective approach to photography is “by its very nature free of ideology.”\(^{66}\) The Bechers seek the “essential,” as they put it, the “soul of industrial thought,” thus reiterating the basic goals of the original Neue Sachlichkeit photographers.\(^{67}\) The Bechers also take up the Neue Sachlichkeit’s interest in industry. This is not only the case at the level of motif. It is also reflected in their rational organization of the photographic process itself, which in its instrumental precision and efficiency mimics the industrial installations. Almost like in a mirror image, the serene industrial buildings reflect the Bechers’ large format camera. Their photographs do not only represent the industrial, they so to speak participate in its functionality, so that the industrial motif underlines the objectivity of the photographic representations. The Bechers’ fascination with engineering and modern technology recall high modernist art and architecture, for instance the architectural theory of Le Corbusier, who posited the industrial as model for both architectural aesthetics and functionality.\(^{68}\) Bernd Becher, furthermore, comments on his interest in industrial architecture in this way:

“It’s not a case of photographing everything in the world, but of proving that there is a form of architecture that consists in essence of apparatus, that has nothing to do with design, and nothing to do with architecture either.”\(^{69}\)

As the Bechers interpret industrial architecture, this has nothing to do with politics or history either, at least not German history:

“I certainly saw the suburban houses with steep gables as unpleasant Nazi architecture… But I have always thought that the industrial world is completely divorced from this. It has absolutely nothing to do with ideology. It corresponds more to the pragmatic English way of thinking.”\(^{70}\)

Statements such as these substantiate the claims made by Buchloh referred to earlier, that the Bechers attempt to repress or evade traumatic memories from recent German history. Not only

---

\(^{65}\) In addition to making portraits, Sander photographed architecture, and to an increasing extent after the Nazis came to power in Germany, he photographed landscape, as they denounced his portrait-project, as mentioned. Renger-Patzsch photographed a wide variety of subjects, including, aside from industrial architecture, plants, animals, architecture and mass produced commodities.

\(^{66}\) Ziegler, op. cit., p. 143.

\(^{67}\) Ibid.

\(^{68}\) See Buchloh, 1998.

\(^{69}\) Ziegler, op. cit.

\(^{70}\) Ibid., p. 143.
is industrial architecture seen as distinct from “unpleasant Nazi architecture,” it is also related to
the “pragmatic English way of thinking,” as Bernd Becher points out (these are his words). But in
front of their photographs one can feel haunted by history anyway, precisely due to the Bechers’
conspicuous attempts to divest historical significance from their motifs. Their search for, and
even monumentalization of, industrial archetypes today can strike the observer as nostalgic and
melancholic, at least in the light of the severe political and ecological consequences of the
industrialization of western countries, that today is as apparent as ever. Their images in my view
speak more of lost utopias than their continued validity, regardless of what the Bechers’ original
intentions were.

As conceived by Struth and the Bechers, but previously also Renger-Patzsch and Sander,
photography is presumed to give privileged access to fixed laws or structures governing reality.
As Hilla Becher comments on her and her husband’s relation to conceptual art, in the first ever
full length interview with the two artists, not only does it become clear that the conceptual art
movement had little importance for the development of their work, her statement also opens for
an interpretation of their works independent of the art institution altogether; it takes us into an
obsolete scientific discourse from the 19th century:

“…we saw Lichtenstein… But our idea of showing the material has much more to do
with the 19th century, with the encyclopedic approach used in botany or zoology …It
became more and more clear to us that there are definite varieties, species and subspecies
of the structures we were photographing. That is, in effect, an old-fashioned approach.
Later it was also used in Conceptual art, logically enough.”

There can be little doubt that the conceptual artist’s critical interrogation of art-conventions had
little to do with the aims sketched out by Hilla Becher here. Most conceptual art at least implicitly
questioned traditional models of representation, drawing instead on the constructivist or
productivist heritage from the historical avantgarde, which precisely attempted to create an
alternative to such notions. The Bechers’ project rather seems to consolidate traditional notions
of representation than to critique or subvert them, at least on the level of explicit artistic
intention. It is however an open question whether their works subvert this ambition
unintentionally, by appearing outdated or unconvincing, as I will argue in relation to Struth’s
works.

71 Ibid., p. 99.
72 Buchloh suggests a connection between the Russian avantgarde and so-called Neo-avantgarde art for instance in “Hans Haacke: Memory
2.4. The “Pictures” generation

But before turning directly to the Lacanian interpretation of Struth’s works, I want to comment on the relation between his photographs and the works of a more recent generation of artists critically investigating conventions for photographic representation. These artists are also frequently connected to Struth’s works, although they in my view approach photographic representation from a completely different perspective. The group of artists I have in mind is referred to by the American art critic Douglas Crimp as the “Pictures” generation. But even though artists such as Jeff Wall or Cindy Sherman, that are part of this “generation” operated in the same period as Struth, and on the same international art scene, there are fundamental differences in their use of photography.

The photographic experiments of these artists in many ways employ the heritage from the works of the conceptual artist, but differ from their works in their increased focus on specific political issues connected for instance to gender and race. Furthermore, this generation of artists tended to treat the photographic image as a “signifier,” appropriated from different cultural contexts, detached from reality or the “referent.” In the works of these artists, we see a fundamental skepticism toward objective representation, that in my view is absent in Struth’s project, as well as the other photographic projects connected to the Neue Sachlichkeit movement.

An early example of this approach is Cindy Sherman’s series of staged photographs, *Untitled Filmstills*, from the late seventies and early eighties where she posed as actress, in pastiches of Hollywood cinema productions from the fifties and sixties [fig. 1]. These images are most frequently interpreted as attempts to expose ideological underpinnings thought to be immanent in cinematic stereotypes. The staging of the image and the reference to filmatic conventions here poses a feministically inflected critique of photographic realism, where the image of the woman is unmasked as a culturally defined construction. Jeff Wall, another photographer critically re-assessing photographic realism at about the same time also made staged photographs in an attempt to challenge or critique realistic photography. In a photograph paraphrasing the famous painting by Edouard Manet, *A Bar at the Folies Bergeres*, which includes the artist holding...
the releaser, his camera on a tripod, and a woman in a singlet, Wall poses a nexus of questions concerning photographic representation, male voyeurism and artistic authorship [fig. 2]. The image appears most of all as a meta-commentary, on the conditions for realistic representation, an approach that underlies most of the works by the artist of the Pictures generation.

Both Sherman and Wall, in other words, revive the language of photographic realism only to question it, and investigate how photographic meaning is constituted, ideologically and discursively. In light of Wall’s and Sherman’s critical approach to photographic representation in the late seventies, any attempt to revive traditional realism easily appears naïve at best, or at worst politically suspect. For many artists in Struth’s own generation, the return of realistic representation after decades of abstract- and minimalist dominance on the American art scene entailed a profound questioning of its validity.

2.5. Exaggerated objectivity

In this artistic environment, it seems like Struth rather than “deconstructing” realism, chose to “side” with traditional realistic photography, as we have seen, and even exaggerate certain of its formal features, such as compositional order and clear and distinct rendering of the motif. The works of Sherman, as well as some other Pictures Generation artists, is related by Foster to trauma, as he sees a traumatic dimension, in part underlying, in part penetrating the inert and lifeless surfaces of the motifs.

And just as Foster finds traces of a repressed trauma in these works – as emotional irruptions from beyond the lifeless image-surfaces appropriated from mass culture – one can sense, behind the meticulously constructed photographs of Struth, a desperation motivating the objectivity in the images. But in Struth’s case this does not emerge from conscious attempts to “tap the forces of the real”, as Foster argues in relation to Sherman’s works, for instance, but results rather from his efforts to prolong the outdated representational paradigm of Neue Sachlichkeit photography.  

Importantly, Struth’s photographs do not passively comply with traditional photographic conventions. Upon closer examination, these images, all of them taken from the exact middle of the streets, appear as petrified, frozen versions of the more fluent and less symmetrical architectural photographs of the proponents of Neue Sachlichkeit photography, for instance the

---

78 Foster describes traumatic dimensions in the works of Sherman and Richard Prince, who both employ photography or photographic reproductions in their work, in The Return of The Real. But as Foster point out, the dynamic here is somewhat different from the one operating in Surrealist art. See Foster, 1995, pp. 145-53.
works of Renger-Patzsch, as discussed above. Struth’s photographs do therefore not function as realistic photographs, reappearing somewhat belatedly and out of historical context. This is what on a superficial level relates them to conceptual art, as commented on above.

As opposed to the Pictures Generation artists, Struth interrogates realism only to revive it in an even more “fundamentalist” way than the original movement. Struth analyses realism – he isolates its individual features – only to “rebuild” it, on what appears for him, at least, as more persuasive grounds. One of the paradoxes of his project is that the insistence on maintaining objectivity and realism simultaneously pressures and challenges the conventions of realist photography, in part making his images seem unnatural and constructed. A similar paradox, that is also implicit in traditional Neue Sachlichkeit photography, but accentuated in Struth’s photographs, is that the search for essential features or “fixed laws” in reality, is conducted through a medium that exclusively depicts the surface of objects – or more concretely, that fixates light-reflections from their surfaces. This contradiction seems to haunt the entire tradition of objective photography, and is heightened in my view to the point of collapse, in Struth’s works.79

79 A similar argument is presented by Baker in relation to Sander’s works. As he points out “…in any photograph, the object depicted has impressed itself through the agency of light and chemicals alone, inscribing a referential excess beyond the control of the creator of any given image. …any consideration of the nature of photographic meaning has to reincorporate the subjective dimension in turning to photography’s ability to be read. On this level, photographic meaning becomes inherently slippery…” Op. cit., p. 75.
3. “Classical” representation in photography

3.1. *Strassen* in light of the “Classical episteme”

Lacan’s seminars on the gaze and repetition are partly presented as a critique of western notions of representation in art and philosophy. Therefore, rather than merely relating Struth’s images to a narrow photo-historical discussion, I will also venture to connect his photographs to wider perspectives on western culture and thought. This in turn will provide the basis for relating his images to Lacan’s psychoanalytic theories. I have previously argued that Struth’s photographs can be related to traditional Neue Sachlichkeit photography, but both his works and those of the Neue Sachlichkeit can be tied to the general model of representation that Lacan connects to trauma. To highlight the basic model of representation which underlies Struth’s works I will initially refer to another French thinker, who was a contemporary of Lacan, namely Michel Foucault and specifically his notion of the “Classical episteme.”

Foucault gives a more historically specific account than Lacan, which also serves to highlight the anachronistic element in Struth’s works, which does emerge based on Lacan’s seminars alone. Furthermore, Foucault’s critique of classical representation is a useful supplement to Lacan’s description of traditional western representation, because it is more precise and systematic, and strikingly recalls not only Struth’s photographs, but many of the works of the Neue Sachlichkeit photographers. Foucault’s theories, which have frequently been related to realistic photography, therefore form a link between Struth’s photographs and Lacan’s treatment of representation.

Foucault was part of the same “structuralist” intellectual milieu as Lacan in France in the sixties. Both Lacan and Foucault not only attempt to challenge the “objective” gaze of science, but also the reflexive model of subjectivity connected to it, emerging in the seventeenth century. They both implicitly present a fundamental critique of photographic objectivity, precisely by complicating positivistic views concerning “transparent” representation and visuality. In a text treating the visual concerns in Foucault’s writings, the American art historian John Rajchman describes his works as “an art of trying to see what is unthought in our seeing, and to open as yet

---

80 This part of the text will be based on Foucault’s definition of the “Classical episteme” in Foucault, 1989.
unseen ways of seeing.” Lacan also sets out to discover unseen elements in what he calls the “scopic regime,” in an attempt to overturn traditional models.

The connection between Struth’s works and the Classical episteme, has not previously been pointed out, at least not explicitly, not even in the “foucaultian” reception of Struth’s work, exemplified for instance by Buchloh’s texts. Connecting Struth’s images to the Classical episteme, dated approximately from 1650 to 1820, highlights the tensions that emerge as he revives an obsolete representational model within a “modern” context. This, in turn, is important for the traumatic perspective outlined here, that presupposes that the photographs somehow differ from conventional photographic practices. This “classical” perspective is also significant, since it distinguishes this study from most foucaultian analyses of documentary photography such as Allan Sekula’s *The Body and the Archive* or *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures*, which addresses photography in relation to the “Modern episteme.”

The term “the Archive,” as defined by Foucault, which is frequently used in relation to Struth’s images is not connected to a specific episteme, but characterizes what he calls the “archaeological” method *as such*—and is applicable to different historical epistemes. Foucault does not discuss trauma, and has explicitly claimed not to be inspired by Lacan’s theories. But at the same time it has been suggested that Lacan’s notion of the traumatic in vision was intended precisely as a criticism against Foucault’s notion of representation. Here as well, Foucault’s notion of classical representation will form the starting point for the discussion of the traumatic features, in this case in Struth’s images, introducing Lacan’s seminars, which are more or less contemporary with the text by Foucault discussed here.

3.2. The Classical episteme

**3.2.1. The “transparent” sign**

---

82 Buchloh perhaps indicates a parallel to the Classical episteme *implicitly* in stating that: “Any photographic or scientific typology operates from the latent assumption that its referent has a finite number of ordered types and relations.” See Buchloh, 1990, p. 6. The presumption that reality consist of a finite number of objects, that at the same time can be inscribed in a system of representations, is according to Foucault a characteristic of the Classical episteme. “A complete enumeration will now be possible: whether in the form of an exhaustive census of all the elements constituting the envisaged whole, or in the form of a categorical arrangement that will articulate the field of study in its totality…” Foucault, 1989, p. 61.
84 Foucault codifies his Archaeological method in Foucault, 1972, *The Order of Things*, which this discussion primarily refers to, is one of the examples of its use. In her seminal essay on photography in light of Foucault’s notion of the Archive, Rosalind Krauss also uses this term in a general, rather than a specific sense. See Krauss, “Photography’s Discursive Spaces” in Krauss, 1986, pp. 131-150.
85 This is suggested by Martin Jay: “In general there was little overt exchange between Foucault and the École Freudienne. Lacan himself only rarely referred to Foucault… It may, however, be the case that his analysis of the eye and the gaze was in part a critical response to Foucault’s account of representation.” Jay, 1993, p. 383, n9.
86 As Jay points out, this is suggested by Pierre-Gilles Guégen in “Foucault and Lacan on Velázquez: The Status of the Subject of Representation,” *Newsletter of the Freudian Field*, 3, 1 and 2, Spring, Fall, 1989. See Jay, Ibid.
There are several features in the artworks under discussion here that call to mind what Michel Foucault has called the Classical episteme. The very notion that a group of photographs can represent the “order” structuring reality suffices to recall the “classical” model of representation. There is something decidedly “unmodern” and therefore untypical of Struth’s contemporary culture more generally, about the taxonomic order and photographic transparency presupposed in his work. Within the “Modern” episteme in general, according to Foucault, the objects of scientific or philosophical research, are not readily available for representation, as presumed within “objective” photography. Within Foucault’s perspective, Struth’s project appears anachronistic, something that has been completely overlooked in the reception of his works, that has emphasized alleged ties to contemporary movements such as conceptual art, as we have seen.

According to Foucault, it was only in the classical period that reality was fundamentally susceptible to representation in the objective, transparent sense presupposed by Struth and the Neue Sachlichkeit photographers. With the onset of the “modern” period, which Foucault dates to the beginning of the nineteenth century, reality tended to be conceived as a perpetually receding “ding an sich”, unattainable for representation. As pointed out in the previous chapter, what particularly characterizes Neue Sachlichkeit photography, including its present-day avatars in the Becherschool, is precisely that the visual appearance of phenomena, as reproduced photographically, is seen as a transparent representation of reality and given structures or essences governing it. Foucault reflects the Neue Sachlichkeit photographers aim in his description of the Classical episteme: “in its perfect state, the system of signs [in the classical age] is that simple, absolutely transparent language which is capable of naming what is elementary…”

A basic condition for representation in the Classical age was that the mental representations, what Descartes called the res cogitans and the object in the realm of extended matter, res extensa, were essentially commensurable and related to each other. This correspondence guaranteed that signs were transparent, and bridged the gap between the appearance of objects and their “essential” structure:

“In the Classical age, to make use of signs is not, as it was in preceding centuries, to attempt to rediscover beneath them the primitive text of a discourse sustained, and retained, forever; it is an attempt to discover the arbitrary language that will authorize the

---

87 This is at least how it is described in The Order of Things. In another work, Birth of the Clinic, Foucault also claims that “objectivity” was a central feature in the “modern” period, but in a somewhat different sense. The meaning foundational for the discussion in this study of “objectivity” is the one presented in the former work.

88 Foucault, 1989, p. 69.
In the Classical period, according to Foucault, reality was conceived as residing completely and exhaustively within the framework of representations. This meant that there was nothing outside representation, and that reality exhaustively was “present” within it. That which is represented “appears” in the sign, not as an approximation but in itself or as such. This faith in the immediate truthfulness of representations is of course a salient feature also in Neue Sachlichkeit photography, in itself indicating a link to classical representation. Foucault also notes that the picture or image was held in particularly high regard within the Classical period, because in it, what was represented also appeared as such.

“It is characteristic that the first example of a sign given by the Logique de Port-Royal is not the word, nor the cry, nor the symbol, but the spatial and graphic representation – the drawing as a map or a picture. This is because the picture has no other content in fact than that which it represents, and yet that content is made visible only because it is represented by a representation.”

The privileging of the pictorial sign is echoed in the assumption held by the Neue Sachlichkeit photographers that the photograph itself is sufficient to make objective representation of objects, thereby disregarding verbal or textual representations.

3.2.2. The Table

Another feature pertaining to the Classical episteme that reverberates in the work by Struth under examination here is the emphasis on taxonomic order. More specifically, within the Classical episteme, phenomena are related to one another in a table. The almost obsessive manner in which Struth attempts to create order in the works in question here, recalls this mind-set. In the classical period, as Foucault describes, knowledge about reality was determined by cross-references within a network of identities and differences, which in turn endowed each phenomenon with its distinguishing characteristics. It was to the extent that one was able to relate phenomena to the table, that one could acquire knowledge about them. It was through this matrix that things

---

89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
91 Walter Benjamin early on noted that these photographers, as opposed to many of their contemporaries declined from giving textual supplements to their images, relying on the picture itself as the sole source for information. See Benjamin, op. cit., p. 215. This has also been one of the most important and steadfast features of Struth’s (as well as the entire Becherschool’s) approach to photography, distinguishing it from most contemporary “schools” within art.
appeared in their true “essence.” The figure of the table was, for Foucault, the basic framework that determined all philosophical and scientific disputes that took place within this period.

In the following Foucault describes the table, and the type of knowledge derived from it:

“…perceptions, thoughts, desires, these signs must have a value as characters, that is, they must articulate the representation as a whole into distinct subregions, all separated from one another by assignable characteristics; in this way they authorize the establishment of a simultaneous system according to which the representations express their proximity and their distance, their adjacency and their separateness – and therefore the network, which, outside chronology, makes patent their kinship and reinstates their relations of order within a permanent area. In this manner the table of identities and differences may be drawn up.”

In the case of Strassen, as well as the typologies of the Bechers, the “objectivity” of the representation is connected to relations established between the photographs within each series, as well as the through the clear and distinct rendering of each motif within the images. This method, or set of premises, strikingly recalls the basic premises for representation just accounted for in relation to the Classical episteme. Furthermore, one could compare Struth’s approach to how for instance plants were classified and organized in the classical era, where each species was identified according to its visual appearance, and related to a geometrical matrix. As Foucault points out, in the classical period science of nature was bent on the “limiting and filtering of the visible,” which in turn “…enables it to be transcribed into language.” The geometrical compositions in Struth’s photographs and the generally reductive treatment of the motif, strongly recall this approach, and align it with classical standards for representation.

In general, the Classical episteme revolves around the question of how nature can be inscribed into the table. Foucault elaborates on how Natural History in the classical age was bent on reducing the plentitude of visual experience to mere “linguistic” elements, or on reducing the distance between nature and language, as he also expresses it:

Forms and arrangements…must be described…either by identification with geometrical figures, or by analogies that must be “of the utmost clarity” In this way it becomes possible to describe certain fairly complex forms on the basis of their very visible resemblance to the human body, which serves as a sort of reservoir for models of

---

93 Ibid., p. 48.
visibility, and acts as a spontaneous link between what one can see and what one can say”.

The representation of architecture in Struth’s images seems structured by similar objectives. Here as well, the individual building or pictorial element is assigned its specific place within the overarching matrix of the series. But also determined by the rigid composition of each individual image, where the motif is divided into geometrized subcompartments, which relate each element to a general, geometrical framework. Just as plants and animals were investigated through reference to geometrical or “linguistic” concepts in the classical age, Struth seems to imply that the general “structures” underlying or determining urban architecture best can be described by relating the motif to some sort of geometric structure.

The reductive filtering of visual experience (if not to say experience in general) in the Classical episteme also excludes color, and impressions from the other senses, such as touch and hearing. A similar reduction is of course a striking ingredient in Struth’s approach to photography, where the black and white photographic image itself is seen as providing privileged access to fundamental features in reality. Taken together with Struth’s emphasis on taxonomic structure, so important also within the Classical episteme, the following quote sums up the striking parallel between Struth’s project and the Classical episteme (I am quoting Foucault at some length here, because he in this passage summarizes a nexus of features that also apply to Struth’s work in question):

“Natural history did not become possible because men looked harder and more closely. One might say, strictly speaking, that the Classical age used its ingenuity, if not to see as little as possible, at least to restrict deliberately the area of its experience. Observation, from the seventeenth century onward, is a perceptible knowledge furnished with a series of systematically negative conditions. Hearsay is excluded, that goes without saying; but so are taste and smell, because their lack of certainty and their variability render impossible an analysis into distinct elements that could be universally acceptable. The sense of touch is very narrowly limited to the designation of a few fairly evident distinctions (such as that between smooth and rough); which leaves sight with an almost exclusive privilege, being the sense by which we perceive extent and establish proof, and in consequence, the means to an analysis partes extra partes acceptable to everyone… And,

Ibid., p. 147.

In this context it is also worth remembering that the figure regarded as the “founder” of the Neue Sachlichkeit movement, Karl Blossfeld, in fact had plants as his main field of interest. And just like the scientists in the classical period, he was most interested in the visual aspects of the plants, rather than their organic, functional aspects that the botanists of his own time was most interested in. This also points to the conclusion that Neue Sachlichkeit photography seems connected to the classical age and standards of representation, while contemporary science, had moved on to different models of representation.
even then, everything that presents itself to our gaze is not utilizable: colours especially can scarcely serve as a foundation for useful comparisons. The area of visibility in which observation is able to assume its powers is thus only what is left after these exclusions: a visibility freed from all other sensory burdens and restricted, moreover, to black and white. This area, much more than the receptivity and attention at last being granted to things themselves, defines natural history’s condition of possibility, and the appearance of its screened objects: lines, surface, forms, reliefs."\textsuperscript{96}

Struth as well chooses to describe reality through an image stripped of accidental details, and seemingly attempt to reduce his motifs to mere “lines, surfaces, forms, reliefs.” The photographic focus on knowledge is a tenet that has followed the movement from the very beginning. This also has bearing on the titulation of the images, in the case of Struth, at least, which is restricted to the names of the places depicted, as well as the year the picture was taken. The name or the act of naming is also designated as one of the most important features in the Classical episteme according to Foucault. (quote or footnote).

\textbf{3.2.3. Cartesian Perspectivalism}

As Foucault points out, the Classical episteme is a fundamentally visual paradigm, in the sense that the table of identities and differences within which knowledge is constituted, appears instantaneously, like an image perceived through vision. Accordingly, the acquisition of knowledge is related precisely to visuality and the image; “…the complete network of signs … [in the] table… will be the image of the things.”\textsuperscript{97} However, as is evident from the utterly conceptual or linguistic nature of Foucault’s table, the type of visuality envisaged here has nothing to do with perception in a physiological sense, but is rather limited to purely rational, geometrical features.


\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., p. 73. This is especially clear in light of the original French terminology. The term “table” is a translation for the French word \textit{tableau}, which, aside from the meaning denoted in the English translation, also means painting or picture. The original terminology thereby emphasizes the visual aspect to an even greater extent that the English term chosen in this translation.
An issue that has been emphasized by the American art historian Jonathan Crary building explicitly on Foucault’s basic concepts, is that the Classical episteme can be related to geometrical perspective. In a study, Crary posits the *camera obscura* as a model for “classical” epistemology.\(^98\) According to Crary, within this contraption, reality is precisely reduced to its conceptual or linguistic essence as was the aim of classical representation according to Foucault. In the camera obscura, the plentitude of vision is ordered and “tabulated” into discrete compartments. Crary explains:

“The aperture of the camera obscura corresponds to a single, mathematically definable point, from which the world can be logically deduced by a progressive accumulation and combination of signs. It is a device embodying man’s position between God and the world. Founded on laws of nature (optics) but extrapolated to a plane outside of nature, the camera obscura provides a vantage point onto the world analogous to the eye of God.”\(^99\)

As Crary shows, in the camera obscura, the plentitude nature, is transformed, or related, through its projection onto a stable plane, to geometrical structures. For instance, in the camera obscura, the foreshortened outlines of quadrilateral objects appear as orthogonals, more or less corresponding to geometrical perspective, as found in early and high renaissance painting (as Crary points out in this text, the camera obscura has been used as an aid for painters at least since the renaissance). Just as we have seen in relation to representation and the construction of sign-systems within the classical age in general, perspective seems to be an instance the type of artificial language, presumed to guarantee objective representations, by recourse to a table. An important implication of the camera obscura model of representation, and the entire Classical episteme, is that it constructs the subject as *consciousness*. As Foucault puts it:

“The project of a science of order...in the seventeenth century, carried the implication that it had to be paralleled by an accompanying genesis of consciousness, as indeed it was, effectively and uninterruptedly, from Locke to the “ideologues.””\(^100\)

Geometrical perspective can be linked both to Foucault’s notion of the Classical episteme and to Lacan’s psychoanalytic theories. Lacan’s point of departure is precisely geometrical perspective, as well as the consciousness-oriented subject position it implicates, also associated with the Cartesian *cogito*. But before I turn to that, and how Struth’s work can be connected to Lacan’s

---

\(^99\) Ibid., p. 48.
\(^100\) Op. cit., p. 79.
theories, I want to show that the “Modern episteme,” according to Foucault following the Classical, represents a striking contrast to the work of Struth as well as Neue Sachlichkeit photography. This indicates the tensions at stake in their re-establishment of the “classical” model of representation within the framework of twentieth century art, as well as culture at large, which is configured according to a completely different notion of representation.

3.3. The “Modern episteme”

I have already indicated that Struth can be seen as an “outsider” within the context of contemporary art, not least because he insists that his photographs function as objective representations. To the extent Struth’s project entails a revival of classical representation, it also creates a tension within the dominant Modern episteme, where a completely different view of representation is dominant, which in turn complicates their functioning as realistic images. Even though Struth attempts to make realistic images, through consciously or not re-establishing an obsolete representational code, his project to some extent is undermined in a context where it appears outdated. Foucault describes the changed conditions of representation, taking place with the onset of the modern era in this way:

“[The transition into the Modern episteme marks] a minuscule but absolutely essential displacement, which toppled the whole of western thought; representation has lost the power to provide a foundation...for the links that can join its various elements together. No composition, no decomposition, no analysis into identities and differences can now justify the connection of representations one to another... The condition of these links resides henceforth outside representation, beyond its immediate visibility, in a sort of behind-the-scenes world even deeper and more dense than representation itself.”

Within the Modern episteme, the system of identities and differences, organized in the table, was replaced by a series of new, abstract and notions such as “man” (in the human sciences), “organism” (in biology), “labor” (in economics) and “language” (in philology), as Foucault explains. Importantly, these concepts could not be represented as such, and were fundamentally different from the “clear” and “distinct” representations in the previous period. Representation accordingly no longer was seen as “transparent,” and vision was not seen as

101 Furthermore, Foucault also indicates a new, “Postmodern episteme” taking shape at the moment he is writing his analysis, an episteme which his own work is meant as marking a transition into. To the extent this latter epistemic change has taken place, of course, the Classical episteme is at a second remove from Struth’s contemporary situation. See Foucault, 1989.
102 Ibid., p. 259.
103 Each of these notions are treated in a separate chapters in The Order of Things to exemplify the epistemic change he is trying to outline and specifically what characterizes the Modern episteme.
having access to “essential” components in reality, and therefore Struth’s conception of photographic representation to a much lesser degree seems to correspond to the Modern episteme.

### 3.3.1. Physiological optics

In terms of optics and visuality, this change is related by Foucault to a shift of emphasis from geometrical to physiological optics, related to the *body*, and not the mind. Physiological optics is importantly also taken up by Lacan, in confronting the classical model of representation. Crary describes the new conception of optics in the modern period as follows:

“… in the empirical sciences…[in the nineteenth century] vision…had been taken out of the incorporeal relations of the camera obscura and relocated in the human body. It is a shift signaled by the passage from the geometrical optics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to physiological optics, which dominated both scientific and philosophical discussion of vision in the nineteenth century. Thus knowledge was accumulated about the constitutive role of the body in the apprehension of a visible world, and it rapidly became obvious that efficiency and rationalization in many areas of human activity depended on it”[^104]

This change was expressed, according to Crary, in the transition from the camera obscura as epistemological model, and with it perspective, to the stereoscope and the Phantasmagoria, where visual experience emerged clearly as a consequence of the *physiological* fact of binocular vision, a fact that was repressed in the Classical episteme, or as an effect of staging. In other words, the notion that vision gives access to structures inherent in reality, as presupposed within the Classical episteme and in geometrical perspective, was abandoned in the modern period.

### 3.3.2. The Modern episteme and the “spectacle”

One of the implications of the transition from geometrical to physiological optics is the decreased emphasis on conceptual or “linguistic” aspects of vision. But it also entails, as we saw, that vision no longer provides a transparent “image” of reality. This undercuts Neue Sachlichkeit’s claim for photographic objectivity, paradoxically at the very moment when photography was invented. Jonathan Crary argues that the changed conception of vision marking the entry into the modern era, is part of the prehistory of the “Society of the Spectacle,”

described by Guy Debord and the Situationists.\footnote{See for instance Debord, 1995.} As Crary explains, the “autonomization of sight, occurring in many different domains, was a historical condition for the rebuilding of an observer fitted for the tasks of “spectacular” consumption.”\footnote{Op. cit., p. 19.}

If Crary contends that vision somehow is breached from the “referent” with the onset of the modern period, a tendency that culminates in a “simulacral” play of detached signifiers in post-modern culture, one could argue that Struth attempts to counter this tendency, and somehow insist on photographic transparency in spite of the contemporary trend pointing in the opposite direction. Crary’s aim is to show that contemporary, computer-manipulated images do not basically challenge traditional conceptions about photographic realism. This is so, since from the beginning of the nineteenth century photographic representation has been seen as determined by the subjective, partly physiological, construction of reality, in the eye and in the brain, as much as representing the object as such, as Crary sees it\footnote{Ibid. This is pointed out in the introduction.}.\footnote{As he states: “There are themes with scientific pretensions that one may encounter at the level of opinion and that are not (or are no longer) part of a culture’s epistemological network: from the seventeenth century, for example, natural magic ceased to belong to the Western episteme, but it persisted for a long time in the interaction of beliefs and affective valorizations.” Foucault, op. cit., p. 398.}

3.3.3. “Total” representation – a pre-modern notion.

Foucault does in fact suggest that an epistemic shift need not be total.\footnote{A typical early criticism of photography for being too tied up in mere superficial appearances, is Baudelaire’s critique of photography, in Salons of 1857. Here he points out, derogatively, that it can be nothing other than the “exact reproduction of nature.” See “Le Public Moderne et La Photographie,” chap. 2 of “Salon de 1859,” in Curiosités Esthiques, Oeuvres Complètes de Charles Baudelaire (Paris: Louis Conard, 1923), I, pp. 264-272.} He opens the possibility for isolated “pockets” within an epistemic configuration, where residues of a previous episteme continue to function. Neue Sachlichkeit photography could be seen precisely as such a residual “classical” tradition, within a Modern- or Postmodern episteme. As art and science split paths and became autonomous “fields” as modernism evolved during the nineteenth century, it seems that “objective” photography was espoused neither by art nor science: On the one hand, it did not acquire the same prestige as painting or sculpture, since as opposed to these media, it made mechanical representations of reality outside art. It contrasted with the l’art pour l’art ideal of this period, which demanded that art went beyond mere realistic depictions of reality and pursued its own, inherently artistic essence.\footnote{Op. cit., p. 19.} On the other, as a visual medium, tied to the superficial appearance of objects, it was mostly seen as irrelevant for science in the modern era, which according to Foucault focused on internal “invisible” functional models. Renger-Patzsch’ ambivalent definition of Neue-Sachlichkeit photography as both science and art, as we saw in the previous chapter, indicates this outsider position, in between what was seen as the most relevant
art and science within modern culture. This has perhaps changed in the 1980’s when Becherschool photography was fully integrated on the international art-scene.

The fact that Neue-Sachlichkeit photography does not distinguish between art and science, itself makes it untypical of “modern” rationality, that separated these spheres strictly. It seems to resist “modern” differentiation, between scientific and aesthetic discourses and thereby recall features from the Classical episteme.
4. Lacan’s theories of vision

4.1. Trauma in “classical” representation

Having showed how Struth’s street photographs, as well as much other Neue Sachlichkeit photography, can be tied to “classical” representation, I will now turn to how Jacques Lacan connects a similar model of representation to trauma. Lacan, in fact, introduces the notion of trauma within the “the scopic register”, as he says, precisely as a critique of geometrical optics and perspective.

4.1.1. The “gaze”

Initially, Lacan’s reassessment of geometrical optics can be regarded as an attempt to “transfer” the dynamic of the conscious and the unconscious, familiar from Freudian psychoanalysis, to the realm of optics and vision. This entails a revaluation of “classical” representation, which, as we have seen, is intimately tied to the faculty of consciousness, in its exclusive focus on language and signification systems. From Lacan’s point of view, geometrical perspective, is always already subtended and determined by what he calls the “gaze,” originating outside the conscious subject, that complicates traditional models of perspective as well as subjectivity. As Lacan puts it himself, highlighting this ambiguous functioning of vision:

“In our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it – that is what we call the gaze.”

Lacan illustrates this ambivalence in visuality by a figure consisting of two superimposed triangles (which Foster relates to Superrealism), the one pointing into the other [fig. 3]. The first triangle represents the cone of vision familiar from treaties on perspective from the renaissance on where the viewing subject, by Lacan referred to as the “subject of representation”, is located directly opposite to the vanishing point. The other triangle represents a subversive supplement to this traditional model of visuality, where the apex of the traditional triangle of perspective, which

---

111 See also Ibid, p. 106.
indicates the position of the viewing subject, is reduced to a mere point among an infinite number of other points on a line. With the introduction and superimposition of this second “perspective” on the first, the subject is reduced to a mere object for the gaze. It becomes a “stain,” as Lacan says, in a “picture” presented to the gaze. As both Foster and Lacan explain, as object of the gaze, the subject presupposed in perspective loses its privileged position and dissolves in a complex texture that it cannot fully overview or comprehend.

In the seminar on the gaze, Lacan defines the traumatic in visibility precisely as the encounter with the gaze – an encounter that is not only unrepresentable as such, but that also eradicates the subject presupposed by classical philosophy, by compromising its position with a second, traumatic vantage point. The emergence of the traumatic in vision can thus be described as the drama of how the different “faculties” of vision struggle to gain dominance of the “scopic regime.”

4.1.2. The “screen”

A key concept for Lacan in describing this dialectic between the two aspects of vision, or the “eye and the gaze”, which is the title of one of his lectures, is the notion of the “screen.” This is also, as I shall return to, a key concept for Foster in describing the irruption of the traumatic in different types of contemporary art. The screen is the aspect of perception or visibility that serves to “protect” the subject against the gaze, by pacifying or taming it. Art is understood by Lacan as a type of structure that serves to protect the subject from the traumatic encounter with the gaze. Suggesting a nomenclature drawing on both Foucault and Lacan, one could regard Struth’s images as “classical screens” insisting on the continued validity of classical representation. In the diagram with the two superimposed triangles, the screen is placed vertically, in the middle of the figure as a section. This element functions simultaneously as image and screen. It is image to the extent that it presents a representation for the conscious subject, and screen to the extent that it tames and withholds its traumatic aspect of the gaze. The screen mediates between the two aspects of vision, and indicates the complex relation between them.

112 Lacan was probably inspired by Freud in his use of the term “screen,” but he used it in a somewhat different sense than him. For a discussion of Freud’s use of the term the “screen,” see for instance David L. Smith, “The Mirror Image of the Present: Freud’s Theory of Retrogressive Screen Memories,” wwwpsychoanalytischeperspectivenbe. As in Lacan’s definition, Freud sees it as a “defense” against a traumatic memory. But as opposed to Freud, Lacan relates the screen to cultural convention, inspired by structural linguistics, and specifically connects it to what he calls the “Symbolic,” whereas Freud defines screen memories as personal images, connected to individual, biographical events.

113 The original French word used by Lacan is ecran, which, as the English word “screen,” denotes both a surface on which an image can be projected, as well as a shield, or protective device, that separates an area from another.
The exact function of the screen is somewhat clouded and unclear in Lacan’s seminar, but is given a precise definition by Foster as the “cultural reserve of which each image is one instance …the conventions of art, the schemata of representation, the codes of visual culture”. As “cultural convention,” or representational code, the screen can be any type of image or sign. What is important is the way it functions within a given cultural context, and that it operates as a “naturalized” language. But even though Foster uses several types of pictorial or art historical examples of different screens, or conventions of representation, the representational model of perspective is especially important in describing how the traumatic emerges as a “symptom” of repression. Perspective is also an important ingredient in Struth’s photographs under study here, where it implicates his work in this “traumatic” logic.

4.1.3. Lacan’s critique of the cogito.

Lacan’s seminars on repetition and the gaze are not merely narrow critiques of optics or vision. It is as much an attack on “classical” thought in general, which as we have seen is intimately tied to visuality and the image. The “geometrical” configuration of the visible, that we saw was so important in the Classical episteme, is intimately tied to the transcendental subject, or the cogito, which in a sense is determined by it – it is the punctual being who views representations from a purely mental vantage point.

As Lacan attempts to transfer to the realm of vision the complex and dynamic model of subjectivity presupposed in psychoanalysis, the cogito is reduced to the mere object of a non-personified gaze, as we saw in the figure of the two inverted triangles. This is similar to how the “Id,” in classical psychoanalysis, plays a determining role in relation to the “Ego,” or

114 Foster comments on this just before providing this definition. Margareth Iversen is another art historian who claims this, in Iversen, 1994, p. 456.

115 Foster, op. cit., p. 140.

116 The term “naturalized” as used here is borrowed from Roland Barthes, who uses this term, from a semiotic perspective, to denote the type of fluent, “readerly” text, that harmonizes with the expectations of the reader, and that makes the representation “invisible” and transparent as such. See for instance Barthes, 1974. Barthes also interprets photography inspired by Lacanian psychoanalysis, and uses the term “stadium” to describe this kind of frictionless, pleasing “reading” of a photograph. See Barthes, 2001.

117 Lacan’s seminars also set out to critique Phenomenology, and specifically they way the proponents of this philosophical “school” according to Lacan retains a notion of the subject reminiscent of the Cartesian reflexive subject. He more than once refers to the phenomenologist philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and especially his major work, The Phenomenology of Perception, in connection with this: “We are dealing with the [phenomenologist] philosopher, who apprehends something that is one of the essential correlates of consciousness in its relation to representation, and which is designated as I see myself seeing myself. What evidence can we really attach to this formula? How is it that, in fact, correlative with that fundamental mode to which we referred in the Cartesian cogito, by which the subject apprehends himself as thought?” Lacan, op. cit., p. 80. Lacan directs a similar critique against what he calls “philosophical research” in general, and he does not distinguish between a “Classical” and a “Modern” episteme, as Foucault does. As he puts it: “In so far as the gaze … is reduced, of its nature, to a punctiform, evanescent function, it leaves the subject in ignorance as to what there is beyond the appearance, an ignorance so characteristic, of all progress in thought that occurs in the way constituted by philosophical research.” Ibid., p. 77.

118 The notion that the subject is constructed in relation to an image, is taken by Lacan from Freud, who developed this concept in “On Narcissism” (1914). Here, and in a later text, “The Ego and the Id” (1923), Freud argues that the development of the Ego involves the libidinal attachment and identification with the image of the body, or one of its parts, in a stage before the infant develops a separate identity in relation to external reality. Lacan first develops his own version of this concept in “The Mirror-Stage as formative of the function of the I,” where the rudiments of the Ego is constituted precisely through the formation of an image, what he calls the “Imaginary,” for instance in relation to the child’s own mirror reflection. Here as well, the image is the subject, and not its reflection. See Lacan, 1999, pp. 3-10.
consciousness. To the extent that the subject presupposed by the cogito is analogous with consciousness or the Ego in Freud’s teaching, the gaze, and the fragmented and decentred subject position connected to it, is analogous with the unconscious or the Id. The dynamic between conscious and unconscious proposed by psychoanalysis, is repeated in the figure consisting of two inverted triangles:

“Below this, I have drawn the two triangular systems that I have already introduced – the first is that which, in the geometral field, puts in our place the subject of the representation, and the second is that which turns me into a picture. On the right-hand line is situated, then, the apex of the first triangle, the point of the geometral subject, and it is on that line that I, too, turn myself into a picture under the gaze, which is inscribed at the apex of the second triangle. The two triangles are here superimposed as in fact they are in the functioning of the scopic register.”

For Lacan, the two aspects of vision always structure and determine each other. The subject represented by the first triangle is thus determined by the unconscious and “traumatic” aspects of the second. The opposition between the two aspects of vision continuously pervades visuality and representation in all its manifestations and challenges the primacy of the conscious subject.

In Lacan’s diagram, the screen is also a picture in “which the painter as creator … sets up a dialogue.” As he states:

---

120 Slavoj Zizek, in a book treating ideology in light of Lacan’s psychoanalytic theories, argues that subjectivity is determined by an interpellation from the social and cultural field, what Lacan calls “the big Other.” As this type of “interpellation,” representations, such as art or photographs explicitly are connected to the construction of subjectivity. Interpellation is also connected to the gaze, as a kind of “look” directed towards the subject, “demanding” that the subject identifies with the general “symbolic” order functioning in a given social environment: “…imaginary identification is always identification on behalf of a certain gaze in the Other… the question to ask is: for whom is the subject enacting this role?” Zizek, 1989, pp. 107-8. (The term “interpellation is borrowed by Zizek from the French philosopher Louis Althusser, who connects the “big Other” to ideology in another interpretation of Lacan’s teachings. Here, ideology is defined in a broad sense, including all fixed political systems including Communism. See for instance Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Lenin and Philosophy (London, 1971)). In light of this, one could see Struth’s images as “interpellating”— and thereby constructing — the transcendental subject developed within the Classical episteme. However, the subjectifying interpellation, according to Zizek, also incites the subject to ask a question in return: what motivates this interpellation, what desire on the part of the big Other is the cause of it. As Zizek phrases the question, “you demand something of me [making the interpellation], but what do you really want, what are you aiming at through this demand?” Zizek, op. cit., p. 111. The demand of the big Other is “always caught in a dialectics in which it aims at something other than its literal meaning.” Ibid., p. 112. This also subverts the initial subjectifying interpellation. This dialectics of “question and answer,” throws new light on the paradoxical, ambiguous role Lacan (and Foster) attributes to the screen, as both pacifying and evoking the gaze. Not only does it imply opposing models of subjectivity and not only vision, but it also indicates that an emotional charge constitutes the driving force structuring representation. As Zizek explains, the screen, and representations, are “the frame co-ordinating our desire, but at the same time a defense…, a screen concealing the gap, the abyss of the desire of the Other… (i.e. the “death drive” in its pure form).” Ibid., p. 118. But Zizek also point out that this screen is by no means complete, but on the contrary points to the traumatic “obverse” of representation: “…as soon as the field of the signifier is penetrated by enjoyment it becomes inconsistent, porous, perforated – the enjoyment is what cannot be symbolized, its presence in the field of the signifier can be detected only through the holes and inconsistencies of this field, so the only possible signifier of enjoyment is the signifier of lack in the Other, the signifier of its inconsistency.” Ibid.
121 Lacan, op cit., 112-113. There are also more “benign” interpretations of the gaze, as for instance by Norman Bryson in Bryson, 1984, who sees it as already semiotic, and therefore not as traumatic in the sense Foster interprets it. Bryson’s view is also pointed out by Foster in Op. cit., p. 165, note 33. Maurice Merleau-Ponty also has a more positive interpretation of a “gaze” similar to that of Lacan, although from a phenomenological, and not psychoanalytical perspective, not least in The Visible and the Invisible (Evanston III, 1968). He does not so much see an opposition, as coherence, between conscious perception and the gaze. This is pointed out by Martin Jay in Jay, op. cit, pp. 298-328.
“Indeed, … on the schema of the two triangles, which are inverted at the same time as they must be placed one upon the other… is the first example of this functioning of interlacing, intersection, chiasma [in vision], … which structures the whole of this domain.”122

4.2. The rupture of “geometral” vision

4.2.1. Anamorphosis

What is important in this context, however, is to note how classical representation and optics, and by implication perspective for Lacan in these seminars is connected to the traumatic in vision. In his seminars on the gaze, these traditional models are interpreted as systematic negations of trauma, which at the same time are determined and fundamentally structured by it, as acts of repression.

In the seminar on the gaze, Lacan gives several examples of how the fundamental ambiguity of vision results in concrete deviations from conventional perspective in art history. For instance, he points out how the widespread use of the so-called anamorphic figure, that was popular among painters from the renaissance on, can be seen as an irruption of underlying traumatic tensions within the “screen” of traditional perspective. The anamorphic figure emerges when a correct perspective reproduction is made from an obtuse angle in relation to an original image, so that it is contorted by the optical foreshortenings. It exemplifies how the traumatic gaze pierces the screen of classical representation. As Lacan sees it, the widespread interest in anamorphosis testifies to the aspects of visuality that is repressed in perspective:

“If I reverse its use [the apparatus used to establish correct perspective in a painting], I will have the pleasure of obtaining not the restoration of the world that lies at the end, but the distortion, on another surface, of the image that I would have obtained on the first… I will go so far as to say that this fascination complements what geometral researchers into perspective allow to escape from vision.”123

And he also adds:

“The geometral dimension of vision does not exhaust, therefore, far from it, what the field of vision as such offers us as the original subjectifying relation. This is why it is so

123 Ibid., p. 87.
important to acknowledge the inverted use of perspective in the structure of anamorphosis … How can we not see here, immanent in the geometral dimension – a partial dimension in the field of the gaze, a dimension that has nothing to do with vision as such – something symbolic of the function of the lack, of the appearance of the phallic ghost?"124

In Struth’s photographs, there are no anamorphic figures, of course, since he limits himself strictly to straight photography. But Lacan’s ambiguous theory of visuality, opens up for an underlying, traumatic dimension in his work as well. The notion that a flawless surface can express an underlying traumatic dimension is also a fundamental assumption for Foster, in his traumatic reading of Superrealism.

Lacan also uses Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* to exemplify “traumatic” use of the anamorphic figure. In this image, an anamorphically disfigured skull hovers in the foreground, and, as Lacan sees it, becomes a manifestation of the gaze or the unconscious within the otherwise faultless perspective construction. Again, Lacan reads the anamorphic figure as a breakdown of the screen, as the point where the censorship implicit in perspective collapses, permitting a glimpse of the underlying traumatic aspect of vision:

“All this shows that at the very heart of the period in which the subject emerged and geometral optics was an object of research, Holbein makes visible for us here something that is simply the subject as annihilated… If one does not stress the dialectic of desire one does not understand why the gaze of others should disorganize the field of perception. It is because the subject in question is not that of the reflexive consciousness, but that of desire. One thinks it is a question of the geometral eye-point, whereas it is a question of a quite different eye – that which flies in the foreground of *The Ambassadors.*”125

In the work of Struth, as opposed to the Holbein painting, perspective is *not* consciously interrupted or negated. However, as I also will attempt to elaborate in detail in the next chapter, for me, Struth’s seemingly obsessive fixation on the compositional devise of perspective, in a medium – photography – that does not normally produce these kind of geometrisized pictorial spaces, imbue the images with an uncanny stiffness and rigidity, that can be explained in the light of Lacan’s more complex model of visuality, and what he at one point describes as “the eye as made desperate by the gaze.”126

---

124 Ibid., pp. 87-88.
125 Ibid., p. 89.
126 Ibid., p. 116.
4.6. Perspective and light

The distinction between geometrical and physiological optics that we saw was important in distinguishing between Classical and Modern epistemes, is also important in Lacan’s distinction between the two types of vision, in his seminars on the gaze. Physiological optics is for Lacan associated with the gaze and the traumatic in visuality.

The type of vision Lacan connects to trauma is a “retinal” encounter with light. “The essence of the relation between appearance and being” says Lacan “…is not in the straight line [as in geometrical optics], but in the point of light – the point of irradiation, the play of light, fire, the source from which reflections pour forth.”127 This is for Lacan a more profound and fundamental aspect of vision. The “being” referred to here is not so much material objects, as presupposed in geometrical optics, as desires, provoked by the gaze. What Lacan highlights here, is what is neglected, or repressed, in classical representation, where this type of visual impressions in Cartesian terminology was described as “secondary sense qualities.” Referring to Descartes’ Optics, as well a work by Diderot,128 Lacan points out that geometrical optics in fact is related to touch, as much as vision. Eyesight is not necessary for perceiving geometrical shapes, which is proved by the fact that the blind are able to do this through touch. With reference to geometrical optics and perspective, Lacan says: “The little schema also allows me to remark that certain optics allow that which concerns vision to escape. Such optics are within the grasp of the blind.”129 Light, on the other hand, and its “shimmering” effect in the eye, is seen as a more fundamentally visual quality, as it is connected to what Lacan sees as the traumatic “real,” connected to the gaze.

This traumatic light also undermine the cogito:

“That which is light looks at me…– something that is not simply a constructed relation, the object on which the philosopher lingers – but something that is an impression, the shimmering of a surface that is not, in advance, situated for me in its distance. This is something that introduces what was elided in the geometral relation – the depth of field, with all its ambiguity and variability, which is in no way mastered by me. It is rather it that

---

127 Ibid., p. 94.
128 The work in question is Letters on the Blind For the Use of Those who See, from 1749, published in Margaret Jourdain (ed.), Diderot’s Early Philosophical Works, (Chicago, 1916).
130 A frequently cited passage from Lacan’s seminar on the gaze, that equated the gaze with light, focuses on the reflection in a floating sardine can, that “sees” young Lacan, sailing a boat off the coast of Brittany. In this story, Lacan describes himself as “out of place”, as a young medical student among fishermen living a much more hazardous and difficult life than he. The light from the sardine here ruptures his imaginary and romantic image of the situation, and lets on the suppressed, “real” difference between himself and the fishermen in the boat with him. See his lecture “Line and Light,” Ibid., pp. 91-104.
grasps me, solicits me at every moment and makes of the landscape something other than a landscape, something other than what I have called the picture.”

That light which “looks at me” is of course the gaze, and hence the traumatic within the visible. Again, it is difficult to overlook how Struth, from the vantage point of Lacan’s notion of visuality suppresses this “physiological” aspect visuality as light in his images, that almost exaggeratedly insists on structuring in the motif as a geometrical system. And it is, as already indicated, to the extent that he conspicuously avoids the traumatic in vision, that the images paradoxically point to it.

4.7. Mimicry

Another example Lacan uses to describe the gaze, and how it can create “interlacing, intersection,” and “chiasma” within visual experience, is animal mimicry. Mimicry is seen by Lacan as an example of how the subject, encountered by the gaze, dissolves into a “picture,” thereby giving up its transcendental subject-position, presumed in perspective and classical thought. In the case of mimicry, to the extent that one assumes the shape of another being or one's surroundings, the “self” is mixed, or confused, with something external to it. This also complicates the classical model of vision and the transcendental model of subjectivity connected to it.

Lacan’s explicit source for this interpretation of mimicry is Roger Callois, who published an article called “Mimicry and Legendary Psychastenia” in the surrealist magazine *The Minotaure*.132 I have already noted the influence of surrealism on the work by Lacan, and his invocation of Callois’ essay in his seminar on the gaze, is another clear example of this. As Callois explains, mimicry in the natural world, is not reducible to camouflage, or mere protection, but occurs also during sex and in fighting to the death where it expresses a less functional impulse. In such instances:

“…the being breaks up, … gives of himself, or receives from the other, something that is like a mask, a double, and envelope, a thrown-off skin, thrown off in order to cover the frame of a shield…

How could this showing satisfy something, if there is not some appetite of the eye on the part of the person looking? This appetite of the eye that must be fed produces the

131 Ibid., p. 96.
132 The original name of the article is "Miméthisme et Psychasthénie Légendaire" published in *Minotaure* 7, June 1935.
hypnotic value of painting. For me, this value is to be sought on a much less elevated plane than might be supposed, namely, in that which is the true function of the organ of the eye, the eye filled with voracity, the evil eye.”

Mimicry, for Lacan, implicates a complete disintegration of the conscious subject, and concomitantly a state of integration with the surroundings. This state can also be encountered in psychosis, in which case it is referred to as “Psychastenia.” But (healthy) humans have the screen as defense against this – this is its primary function: “Man, in effect, knows how to play with the mask as that beyond which there is the gaze. The screen here is the locus of mediation,” as Lacan points out.

Even though mimicry hardly can be connected to Struth’s work, it is another example of a more complicated notion of visuality and representation which provide parameters for describing repressed aspects in his works. If mimicry represents a breakdown of the screen and subjectivity, so that it becomes a picture for a threatening gaze, Struth’s early work seems like an extreme enactment of the “taming” and “civilizing” function of the image as screen. But Hal Foster elaborates, as mentioned, on how even this insistently “screening” art can subvert its traditional function and forefront the traumatic as such, precisely in pressing, or exaggerating this function. It is precisely this desperate aspect of the screening function I want to connect to the work of Struth.

As we have seen, Struth’s images under discussion here have many features that connect them to what I have described as “classical” representation. The entire Becherschool, as well as its predecessors in Neue Sachlichkeit photography, can indeed be connected to this lineage. Struth’s “classicism” becomes especially evident, when measured against the modernist art and philosophy that has challenged classical representation during the last 150 years, at least.

However, these features in Struth's works can also be related to Lacan’s “traumatic” critique or re-reading of “classical” representation. By connecting Struth’s works to a classical lineage, one can also implicate them in the dynamic of the “eye and the gaze” described by Lacan in relation to visuality. Lacan does not only point out that perspective is only just one of several configurations of visuality, and therefore not “objective” in the classical sense, it is also fundamentally determined by the unconscious and traumatic aspects of vision that underlie it. What I want to move on to in the next chapter, is how this classical model of representation is implemented in concrete works by Struth, but at the same time I want to argue that they make visible underlying traumatic tensions precisely in the act of suppressing these forces.

134 Ibid., p. 107.
5. Perspective

5.1. Perspective in Strassen

It has been noted in texts on the street images by Struth that the straight, receding lines in the architecture produce an effect similar to central perspective in painting. As I see it, this is striking in most of his early street-photographs, and based on the premises outlined in the previous chapters, this can serve to connect his photographs to the “classical” model of representation. But at the same time it can also connect his images to Lacan’s discussion of the traumatic in visuality, in the seminar on the gaze, which also is connected to perspective. In this chapter, I will take a closer look at some of Struth’s images, and argue that his rigorous compositions, and specifically his introduction of “orthogonals” in his photographic images, evoke a traumatic dimension, as defined by Lacan in his seminars.

5.1.1. Sommerstrasse, Düsseldorf, 1980

As explained in the introduction, the effect of converging “orthogonal” lines in Struth’s early street-photographs, results from his choice to position his camera in the exact middle of the streets, in combination with the rectilinear character of his street-motifs. An image where the orthogonals are particularly noticeable, and which is one of the most frequently reproduced images from this series, is Sommerstrasse, Düsseldorf, 1980 [fig 4]. This image functions as an emblem of the entire series, on catalogue covers and posters, and I will use it as an example of how the visual effect of perspective emerges in the images generally. To the list of particularly clear examples of “central perspective,” however, also belong a group of images taken in New York in 1978 [figs. 10-18] (The orthogonals here emerges as a consequence of the grid pattern of the bulk of Manhattan’s city plan); among numerous other examples are Clinton Road, London, 1978, Rue aux Laines, Brussels, 1980, and another Düsseldorf motif, Düsselstrasse, from 1979, but also later images [figs. 5-9, 19-24].

In Sommerstrasse, as in practically all of Struth’s early Strassen photographs, the overall composition is dominated by two rows of buildings, flanking a central street, receding directly into the center of the composition. In this image, the buildings are mostly from the fifties, but in other images,

---

such as Rue aux Laines, the age of the buildings vary, also within each single photograph. As in most of Struth’s works, there are no people included in this image. The windows in the houses are mostly shut and empty, and the few shops in the street appear closed – a consequence of the fact that all the images are taken early in the morning, before business hours. At the end of the street, in the small rectangle formed by the edges of the street and the houses, another row of houses is situated, more or less identical to the others. This one stands at an obtuse angle, blocking the view. This compositional scheme, consisting of two rows of houses aligning a single street, and another house, or group of houses, interrupting the view at the end, is repeated by Struth in a number of images from the late seventies even into the nineties. Bernd and Hilla Becher, who were Struth’s teachers when he first developed this formula, commented in an interview that these images represented a breakthrough for Struth, and that he had found “a way of documenting not only German architecture, but urban infrastructure and even history” in this motif. He had found, as they interpreted it, a “goldmine.”

5.1.2. “Orthogonals” in Sommerstrasse

But let us look more closely at how perspective emerges in Sommerstrasse, emphasizing a geometrical structure in the motif. Just like in an early renaissance painting, the architecture determines the spatial composition of the image. The row of houses on the left has a common cornice, traversing the full length of the city block, linking the individual houses through a unifying axis. The vertical lines pronounced in the image also contribute to the compositional effect of perspective; the alternating light and dark houses resemble the kind of checkerboard pattern one often finds in early renaissance painting on the floor. Just like in this type of paintings the alternating light and dark rectangles structure the three-dimensional space in the image. On the right side of the street, one can find a similar pattern, although not quite as clear.

Another set of elements that contribute to “geometrize” this image, and thereby to make it a specifically clear example of his classical approach to photographic representation, is the tracks for the tramline in the street and the electric wires hanging above it. On the pavement in the street, the four tracks for the streetcars form completely straight, receding “orthogonal” lines conforming to the structure indicated by the architecture. One can follow the dark embossment in the street, all the way from the lower edge of the photograph into the center. Similarly, suspended above the street, one can follow three wires, surging in the same direction, into the center of the image-space. Additionally, at steady intervals, these wires are traversed at right

---

136 Ziegler, op. cit., p. 143.
137 For an account of perspective in early renaissance painting, see for instance Erwin Panofsky, 1991, where he also, as one of first, treats it as a cultural convention, rather than as method for “objective” representations. For a more recent account, see for instance Damisch, 1995.
angles by another set of wires for the street lighting. Together, the wires and rails weave a geometrical pattern that submerges and entirely encapsulates the motif. These elements correspond to the geometrical structure pronounced in the architecture. In addition to the axes I have mentioned in the buildings, there are also the axes in the sidewalks and the cobblestones dividing the sidewalks from the street. All of the axes converge more or less precisely toward the same “vanishing point,” and in that way participate in producing the effect of central perspective.

Another central feature in these images is the complete repression or exclusion of all action, or narrative contents. This, in turn, places extra emphasis on the structure or composition in the image. The image’s completely monotonous, uneventful character is underlined by the fact that no element in it stands out, or draws specific attention to itself. For instance, in this image the pavement is dusty, but not dirty. The street is broad and straight, but not monumental, and the houses are neither small nor impressively large. Struth chooses motifs that look more or less like this in almost all of his street-photographs, at least those taken in the seventies and eighties. The buildings, due to this, do not so much come across as “figures” standing out against a background. On the contrary they resemble empty stages, emptied of events or “drama”, an effect, furthermore, that Struth himself has predicted. In this sense, the buildings seem more like spatial delimiters than as positive entities filling the space. Since there is hardly any subject treated in the images, all the more attention is given to the subject observing the image, who appears to be constructed as the Cartesian subject of cogito and geometrical optics, in light of how the images are composed. Struth’s compositions come across as general reflections on the conditions of photographic realism, pointing as much to the way the different photographs are made, as to the individual features of the motifs.

Furthermore, another element that emphasizes the geometrical structure in the images, and aligns it with classical representation, is that they are in black and white. This, of course, can be seen as a purely technical aspect, but at the same time, it fits into a pattern where as many contingent details as possible are elided, permitting the overall structure to emerge more clearly. Color and light, as we have seen, were seen as “secondary” qualities in the Classical period. This, to an extent, is echoed in Struth’s images, in this way.

138 Buchloh quotes him like this in Buchloh, 1990.
139 A similar interpretation is given by Norman Bryson who has interpreted Struth’s architectural photographs from a narratological perspective: “While the narrative design of the city as jungle proceeds by assimilation details into large-scale units (the pristine office building, the demolition, the weathered building the “ancient” building, and so forth), the even clarity of the print prevents any one area form assimilating another to itself. If narrative works by cutting or braking the image into semantic bocks, and then ordering these into a hierarchy of relevance, the equivalence of detail across the entire surface of Struth’s print works to counter and undo that basic act of division on which narrative depends, by insisting that each area of the image exists at the same degree of tension, with the overall continuum of the surface.” Bryson 1998, p.58.
140 This is also pointed out by Ulrich Loock in Struth and Loock, 1987, p. 74.
5.1.3. Perspective as a painterly idiom

To the extent that Struth’s images emulate the compositional model of perspective, the spatial construction in the images can be connected to painting, and especially early renaissance painting, in relation to which it was developed. And paradoxically more so than most types of photography, as this has been practiced and theorized since its invention in the late 1830s.\(^\text{141}\) The link between Struth’s photographs and painting, interestingly, is substantiated by the fact that before he turned to photography, he actually made paintings using a geometrical perspective. These paintings were based on, or superimposed on, photography.\(^\text{142}\) In the painting *Untitled 1973* [fig. 27], for instance, which shows the silhouette of a seated figure in an interior, Struth has employed a completely coherent perspective system of the type developed in early renaissance painting. On a purely technical level, this painting could be an exercise in geometric perspective construction. Struth has noted in an interview that his interest in photography developed out of his growing interest in realistic depiction in painting:

> „Schon meine Malerei war immer realistischer geworden, ich wollte immer mehr Details malen. Dabei war klar, dass es mir eigentlich weniger um den Prozess das Malens ging als um die Tatsache, ein Bild zu konstruieren.“\(^\text{143}\)

Struth also combined photography with painting for a period, painting directly on the photographs, before he finally turned to photography, but there is little to indicate that the use of perspective for him had any other function than to create realistic images.\(^\text{144}\) The fact that Struth made this painting only three years before initiating *Strassen*, corroborates the impression that Struth has a special interest in perspective, and that its use in this series is not accidental.

---

\(^{141}\) Many photo-theoreticians point out the difference between photographic representation and the painterly model of perspective. Crary, for instance, argues that the photographic apparatus belongs to the modern period being invented in 1839, and not the classical according to Foucault’s periodization, and therefore contrary to common belief does not represent the culmination of perspective, as developed in renaissance painting. As he sees it, only the camera obscura as such, and not photography, participates in the Classical episteme, and is related to geometrical optics and perspective: “…the specific account that interests me here, one that has become almost ubiquitous and continues to be developed in a variety of forms, is that the emergence of photography and cinema in the nineteenth century is the fulfilment of a long unfolding of a technological and/or ideological development in the West whereby the camera obscura evolves into the photographic camera. The accumulation of knowledge about light, lenses, and the eye becomes part of a progressive sequence of discoveries and achievements that led to increasingly accurate investigation and representation of the physical world… I will argue, however, that that the camera obscura and the photographic camera, as assemblages, practices, and social object, belong to two fundamental different organizations of representation and the observer, as well as of the observer’s relation to the visible.” Crary, op. cit., pp. 26-32. Therefore, to the extent Struth relies on perspective and classical representation to ensure photographic “objectivity”, his project is paradoxically most fundamentally linked to an episteme that precedes the invention of photographic technology altogether. Susan Sontag, in her book treating photography, also challenge commonsensical notions of photographic objectivity and connects photography fundamentally the “surrealistic,” that explicitly opposes “objective” representation. She points out, for instance that “The contingency of photographs confirms that everything is perishable; the arbitrariness of photographic evidence indicates that reality is fundamentally …an array of casual fragments…only by looking at reality in the form of an object – trouch the fix of a photograph – is it really real, that is, surreal.” Sontag, 1973, p. 80. John Berger presents a similar argument in Ways of Seeing, as Martin Jay points out in Jay, op. cit., p. 134.

\(^{142}\) See Hambourg and Eklund, op. cit.

\(^{143}\) This interview was printed in *Kunstforum* 144, 1999, p. 251.

\(^{144}\) Hambourg and Eklund, op. cit.
Struth’s introduction of perspective in his street-photographs does not appear as an attempt to appropriate or “deconstruct” representational codes from painting, as in the works of for instance Jeff Wall from about the same time as we have seen. His images can be seen as an attempt to perpetuate a model of representation that developed in tandem with perspective in painting, namely the Classical episteme, but which is not necessarily tied to painting as such. Struth does not treat perspective as a convention at all, but connects it inherently to objective representation.

Comparing Struth’s photographs to architectural photography, furthermore, throws his use of perspective into relief, since most architectural photographers avoid the type of strict symmetrical compositions that Struth adopts in his photographs. An exception in “standard” architectural photography is photographs of monumental buildings that are symmetrical in design, such as palatial complexes. The photographer in these cases naturally assumes a central position, directly in front of the building, like Struth does in his works. But with more anonymous and quotidian architecture, such as the buildings Struth focuses on in his early street-photographs, the case is different. That Struth’s photographs differ from conventional architectural photography, and not only avant-garde conceptual art, contribute to making them appear somewhat unfamiliar and awkward for the contemporary beholder.

5.2. Perspective as Traumatic

5.2.1. Traumatic perspective in Superrealism

However, the question remains, to what extent can these images be related to Lacan’s notion of trauma? To clarify this, I first want to return to how Foster describes the traumatic aspects in Superrealist art, also based on its use of perspective. Here, as Foster explains, the traumatic emerges through the pressuring of representational conventions to the point of collapse:

“…superrealism is…an art pledged not only to pacify the [traumatic] real but to seal it behind surfaces, to embalm it in appearances. (Of course this is not its self-understanding; superrealism seeks to deliver the reality of appearance. But to do so, I want to suggest, is to delay the real – or, again, to seal it.) …In …superrealism…the structuring of the visual is strained to the point of implosion, of collapse onto the viewer. In front of these paintings one may feel under the gaze, looked at from many sides…”

Foster uses two paintings by Richard Estes as examples of how Superrealism can be traumatic:

“In front of these paintings one may feel under the gaze, looked at from many sides: thus the impossible double perspective that Richard Estes contrives in *Union Square* (1985), which converges on us more than extends from us, or his equally impossible *Double Self-Portrait* (1976), in which we look at a diner window in complete perplexity as to what is inside and what is outside, what is in front of us and what is behind. If *Union Square* pressures a Renaissance paradigm of linear perspective like *The Ideal City*, *Double Self-Portrait* pressures a baroque paradigm of pictorial reflexivity like *Las Meninas*.”

As is clear from Foster’s statement, in both these images, it is perspective that evokes the “presence” of the gaze, but through being distorted, in one way or another. Foster describes the traumatic aspect of perspective a few lines under like this: “As reproduced in this art, these lines and surfaces [indicated by perspective] often distend, fold back, and so flatten pictorial depth.”

Perspective, in short, collapses, in the sense that it appears constructed and artificial, and fails to produce a convincing representation of the motif. Estes’ *Union Square* [fig. 25] is similar to Struth’s images, in its overt emphasis on orthogonals, and particularly to Struth’s street photographs taken in New York in 1978, which show similar motifs as his painting. In Estes’ work, there are several vanishing points, resulting from the fact that he has used a number of photographs in making the image. This marks a concrete, internal rupture within the picture, and as Foster points out, pressures renaissance perspective as we find it for instance in the anonymous quattrocento masterpiece *The Ideal City* [fig. 28] But this paradigm is pressured and undermined also by filtering it through photographic detailing, making it appear “mechanical” and to some extent lifeless. Foster summarizes concretely how convention is undermined in Superrealism in general, implicitly naming criteria for how perspective can appear “traumatic” as follows:

”superrealism attempts this sealing in three ways at least. The first is to represent apparent reality as a coded sign. Often manifestly based on a photograph or a postcard, this superrealism shows the real as already absorbed, into the symbolic (as in the early work of Malcolm Morley). The second is to reproduce apparent reality as a fluid surface…The third is to represent apparent reality as a visual conundrum with reflections and refractions of

146 Ibid., p. 142.
147 Ibid.
148 Estes states this in Meisel, 1985, p. 35.
many sorts. In this superrealism, which partakes of the first two, the structuring of the visual is strained to the point of implosion, of collapse onto the viewer.  

All these features indicate that the image not only has become reduced to cliché, but also to a lifeless surface, and as a consequence that they no longer function as convincingly realistic images. This movement’s most important gallerist and theorist, Louis K Meisel, points out that what specifically characterizes the works of Estes and related artists is that they include elements from photographic representation in the medium of painting. He therefore systematically refers to their works as “Photorealism.” The Superrealists – and Estes is a good example – for instance introduced a level of detail into painting, and homogenous treatment of the image-surface, that is associated with photography, according to Meisel. This provoked an undermining of traditional painterly representation, as Foster sees it, despite the avowed intention of the artists to maintain realistic representation. In a related, but inverted manner, Struth as we have seen introduces into photography a model of composition conventionally associated with painting. He thus creates a similar confusion between different sets of conventions that complicates the interpretation of the images.

One of the features of Foster’s reading of Superrealism that I want to extend to the work of Struth, is that the works confuse different genres and sets of conventions, and particularly those of painting and photography. Struth’s approach to photography is in conflict with photographic conventions in a wider sense as we have seen; not only architectural photography, but also contemporary art photography, especially through its conspicuous use of perspective.

Struth’s images can appear as a sign or a cliché as well, imitating the conventions from painting. A difference from Superrealism, however, is that Struth’s images do not focus on the visual opulence typical of the commodity and advertising aesthetic, as the former does. But this does not prevent, as I see it, the undermining of representational conventions in Struth’s images, to the extent that they appear exaggeratedly rigid and unnatural. Estes also confuses the viewer by

---

149 Ibid, pp. 141-142.
150 Meisel indicates this through coining the (today common) term Photo-Realism instead of “Superrealism” that for instance Foster uses. As he says: “In the early sixties… numerous… words began to appear to describe the different branches of the realist tree. Among there were Super-Real, Magic Real, Sharp Focus, Radical Real, Hyperreal, and Romantic Real. All of these names were ambiguous and essentially interchangeable. …In 1968… I began calling their work and that of several others Photo-Realism.” Meisel, 1980, p. 12. Furthermore, he gives five criteria for “a full-fledged contributor to the Photo-Realist movement”, where the photographic aspects of painting is essential:
1. The Photo-Realist uses the camera and a photograph to gather information.
2. The Photo-Realist uses a mechanical or semimechanical means to transfer the information to the canvas.
3. The Photo-Realist must have the technical ability to make the finished work appear photographic.
4. The artist must have exhibited work as a Photo-Realist by 1972 to be considered one of the central Photo-Realists.
5. The artist must have devoted at least five years to the development and exhibition of the Photo-Realist work.
Ibid., p. 13.
152 For Foster, there are clear ties between the glossy surfaces of superrealist painting and the “tangled, lurid surfaces of capitalist spectacle: the narcissistic seduction of shop windows, the luxurious sheen of sports cars – in short, the sex appeal of the commodity-sign, with the commodity feminized and the feminine commodified in a way that even more than pop, superrealism celebrates rather than questions.” Op. cit., p. 142.
including a number of reflections in his images, thereby creating uncertainty as to what one is actually seeing. This also emphasizes the constructed character of the image, which is painted following a photographic reproduction of a specific site (that itself includes a number of reflections). This is one of the strategies Superrealist artists use more generally to undermine traditional “realist” readings.153

In the other Estes image used as example by Foster here, *Double Self-Portrait* [fig. 26], perspective is deranged in a somewhat different way. But in this image as well, the “traumatic” emerges through excessive or “misplaced” orthogonals, which do not seem to produce a coherent spatial construction. This paraphrasing of traditional perspective according to Foster occasions a traumatic rupturing of the spatial illusion.

Even though the “orthogonals” in Struth’s image converge towards a single vanishing point, and not several, as in *Union Square*, there are similarities between how the works by the two artists pressure, and make strange, the conventions of representation, not least by casting them in a medium and a context where they seem out of place. In Struth’s works as well, to use Foster’s words, the “lines and surfaces often distend, fold back” and thereby undermine the easy consumption of the image.

Foster’s emphasis on perspective, and its derangement, in describing the traumatic in Superrealist art, echoes Lacan’s emphasis in his seminar on the gaze, where perspective always already implicates a traumatic gaze. But Foster goes a step further than Lacan, however, developing a model for how certain types of contemporary art render perspective traumatic, as we have just seen. It is in light of Foster’s interpretation of Lacan that I want to interpret the work of Struth here. Foster ads a dimension to Lacan’s theories, which presupposes that all art fundamentally is pledged to tame or pacify the gaze. For Foster, art in many cases interrupts or undermines its taming function.

### 5.2.2. The vanishing point as locus of the gaze

The gaze is always implicit, or somehow “present” in visual perception, from a Lacanian perspective, just as the gaze always subtends the consciously perceiving “eye,” in Lacan’s model of the two inverted triangles. Interestingly, Foster relates the gaze explicitly to the vanishing point in perspective painting in a footnote in *The Return of the Real*.

---

153 See Meisel, 1985, on Estes.
“As we will see, this traumatic point [the “hole” where the real, and thus the traumatic is encountered] may be associated with the vanishing point in linear perspective from which the depicted world gazes back at the viewer. Perspectival painting has different ways to sublimate this hole: in religious painting the point often represents the infinity of God (in the Leonardo Last Supper it pierces the halo of Christ), in landscape painting the infinity of nature (there are many nineteenth-century American examples), and so on. Superrealist painting, I will suggest, seals or smears this point with surfaces, while much contemporary art seeks to present it as such – or at least to counter its traditional sublimations.”

While Foster gives a general definition of the screen as “the conventions of art” and “the codes of visual culture,” perspective is special inasmuch as it encompasses a specific “weak point,” in the vanishing point. In this sense, perspective does not completely screen the gaze, in the sense that it is tamed or pacified by it, but simultaneously exposes and facilitates it. Therefore, perspective, in a sense, and to a certain extent, also thrusts the gaze forward. But in Foster’s interpretation of Superrealism, he adds that it is the exaggerated attempts to cover up, or sublimate the gaze that betrays the traumatic dimension, and not any employment of perspective.

The French Art historian Hubert Damisch also uses Lacan’s seminars discussed here in support of seeing the vanishing point as the origin of the gaze, in a study of perspective in western art, thereby emphasizing its traumatic aspect. Discussing the vanishing point as described in Brunelleschi’s treatise on perspective he comments that (the latter part of this passage is a quote from Lacan):

“… on the spot supposed to correspond to the point of maximum clarity and distinction, is a hole blotting out the center of the image. At the very point…”There is something

==Notes==

154 Ibid., p. 264.
155 The question of whether perspective encompasses or implies the gaze as such in Lacan’s teachings is a contested issue, that for instance has been addressed in relation to Lacanian film criticism, and especially that of Christian Metz, by Joan Copjec. The approach to this question hinges on how the “screen” mediates between the two aspects of vision, as implied in Lacan’s diagram consisting of the “superimposed” cones, discussed earlier. Copjec reproaches these film critics from interpreting the “screen” as too hermetically sealed, “trapping” the subject within representation, and thus also ideological closures. She points out, on the other hand, with reference to this seminar by Lacan that the image is constructed around a point of “absence” in the representation, which is not “complete” in itself, that opens up for the gaze, and the traumatic dimension underlying it. As Copjec explains: “[when Lacan] says…that a painting, or any other representation, is a “trap for the gaze,” he means that the representation attracts the gaze, induces it to imagine a gaze outside – and observing – the field of representation. It is this second sense of trapping, whereby representation appears to generate its own beyond (to generate, we might say, recalling Lacan’s diagram, the second triangle, which the science of optics neglects to consider) to conceive of language as construction the prison walls of the subject’s being. Lacan argues that the subject sees these walls as trompe l’oeil and is thus constructed by something beyond them. For, beyond everything that is displayed to the subject, the question is asked: what is being concealed from me? What in this graphic space does not show, does not stop not writing itself? This point at which something appears to be invisible, this point at which something appears to be missing from representation, some meaning left unrevealed, is the point of the Lacanian gaze. It marks the absence of a signified; it is an unoccupiable point, the point at which the subject disappears. The image, the visual field, then takes on a terrifying alterity that prohibits the subject from seeing itself in the representation, as the mirror assumes the function of a screen.” Copjec, “The Orthopsychic Subject: Film Theory and the Reception of Lacan.” October, Vol. 49 (Summer 1989), p. 69.
whose absence can always be observed in a picture – which is not the case in perception. This is the central field…behind which is situated the gaze. Consequently…[in] the place of a central screen…I am elided as subject of the geometral plane.”

In other words, the “screen” of perspective, constructed to ensure the position of the subject, here also challenges its supremacy and implicates the gaze. Foster however adds that if perspective is traumatic, it must seem exaggerated or “anxious.”

5.2.3. Anxious perspective: De Chirico, Ernst and Munch

In a book Foster wrote three years before The Return of The Real, namely Compulsive Beauty, treating surrealism in relation to Freud’s notion of the death drive, he also uses Lacan’s seminar on the gaze as support for a traumatic reading of certain artworks. Here as well, perspective appears traumatic to the extent that it seems “unnatural” or superimposed in the motif. He especially mentions Giorgio de Chirico and Max Ernst as examples of artists who invert what for Lacan is the traditional function of perspective, namely to pacify the gaze, by manipulating perspective in their works. This, hopefully, will clarify further how Foster interprets Lacan, and applies his seminar on the gaze to show how perspective can appear “traumatic.”

As Foster explains in Compulsive Beauty, in the work of some surrealist artists, perspective is retrieved, after being rejected by modernist art around the turn of the century, initially by Cezanne and the cubists. But in the works of these artists perspective is distorted, not wholly unlike how it appears in Superrealist art:

“In…[de Chirico’s] paintings perspective works less to ground any depicted figure than to unsettle the expected viewer; it is often thrown so forward that things appear to see us. Thus if de Chirico partially revives perspective he does so in a way that disturbs it from within. Both point of coherence, viewing and vanishing, are decentered, sometimes to the point where the “seer” appears within the scene as a sightless, degendered mannequin, a “medusa with eyes that do not see.” [Quotation by de Chirico from “Meditations”] As rational perspective is deranged, the visual array as such becomes uncanny: a forest less of iconographic symbols than of enigmatic signifiers concerning sexuality, identity, and difference.”

As Foster describes, it is as if space in de Chirico’s paintings, that a little earlier in the same paragraph is referred to as “cityscapes of paranoid perspectives,” looks back at us, like the

---

Lacanian “gaze” as described in the aforementioned seminars. Foster also refers explicitly to Lacan in relation to this interpretation of de Chirico’s works:

“It is as if de Chirico pictorializes what Lacan theorizes about ”the scopic field”: [citing Lacan, op. cit., p. 109] ”Everything is articulated between two terms that act in an antinomic way – on the side of thing, there is the gaze, that is to say, things look at me, and yet I see them.” De Chirico was interested in Renaissance treaties on perspective... However, his partial rehabilitation of perspective, like that of Duchamp, destabilizes it. Not only does de Chirico rework it in psychic rather than realist terms, but he also stresses its paranoid aspect (i.e., the sense that the viewer is watched in turn)”.159

Foster’s interpretation of de Chirico becomes especially relevant for Struth’s works, since he in an interesting anecdote says that he was inspired specifically by de Chirico’s works in relation to the paintings he made a couple of years before he initiated Strassen, employing perspective. Struth also says he was interested in Edvard Munch’s paintings, which distort perspective in a similar way. He later even planned to photograph a painting by Munch with this type of exaggerated perspective, which he became interested in as a student.160

Foster does not explain concretely which elements in the paintings define perspective as “paranoid” here, as opposed to “normal” perspective in traditional painting. Nevertheless, in the image in question, The Enigma of the Day, from 1914, the orthogonals are exaggeratedly emphasized, with steeply converging lines. The crucial point in Foster’s “traumatic” interpretation of perspective in de Chirico’s work (as is the case with his reading of Superrealism), is that perspective, if put under stress, or detached from the continuum of the pictorial space, so to speak “implodes” so that the geometric lines whose traditional function is to underpin and center the position of the viewing subject, revert into ego-disintegrating vertigo.

It is precisely this kind of defamiliarization of convention that is enacted by De Chirico in this work, as well as in many other of his paintings, which I want to relate to Struth’s early Strassen images, to the extent that he too, challenges conventions for architectural photography by introducing the “classical” model of perspective. As pointed out in this chapter, the orthogonals are clearly indicated in Struth’s photographs. This so much so that they appear unconventional as architectural photographs, even compared with “strict” photographic schools such as Neue Sachlichkeit photography. Based on this I would argue that the spatial illusion of the images is disturbed, if not disrupted, and that they no longer function as conventional, realistic

159 Ibid., p. 246.
160 See Hambourg and Eklund, op. cit. pp. 158 and 164.
representations. On the contrary, one might be led to speculate on what underlying emotional tensions motivate this extremely rigid photographic approach.  

In this chapter I hope to have argued that Struth imposes on his photographs the representational conventions of perspective, ultimately derived from painting, and originating in a pre-photographic period, thereby pressuring photographic conventions to a point of collapse. According to Lacan, perspective itself is structured around a central “hole” – the vanishing point – that evokes the gaze and thus trauma. This, at least, is how his teaching has been interpreted by several critics and historians of art, including Foster. But traumatic aspect of perspective becomes heightened by the fact that it is transferred to a medium that does not conventionally employ it and to a historical context where it seems out of place. Just as Foster argues in relation to Superrealism, Struth in fact undermines the credibility of his own photographs precisely in his efforts to underpin their objectivity.

There is, furthermore, another aspect of Struth’s images that, from a psychoanalytic perspective, links them to trauma, and that also undermines their traditional representational function. In the next chapter I want to focus on one of the most striking features his project, namely repetition. This is also perhaps the one that most emphatically connects it to trauma, as interpreted in light of Lacanian theory.

---

161 Rosalind Krauss has suggested another “Lacanian” interpretation of twentieth century art, in this case modernist painting employing grid patterns, which can throw light on how a rigid artistic project, following a strict rule, can be interpreted as “traumatic.” She tries to show how modernism, construed as a purely visual, self enclosed enterprise, can be interpreted as repressing a connection to an emotional and social reality, outside art. She does this by showing how modernism’s logic can be inscribed in a structuralist quadrangular diagram. This figure is apt, she says, for indicating an underlying “traumatic” dimension because it simultaneously maps modernism’s image of itself, and reveals the deception involved in this construction, seen from a Lacanian vantage point. Krauss’ reading as I see it underscores my interpretation of Struth’s works, since they also rely on “pure” visuality, and its ability to represent fundamental structures. And just as Krauss argues that the grids and geometrical figures within painterly modernism inadvertently reveals what it leaves out of the picture, precisely through their exacerbated attempts repress it, I want to argue that perspective in Struth’s images paradoxically evokes the trauma it is constructed to leave out. Krauss argues as follows: “The advantage of the graph as a picture of modernism and its visualist logic is that it is perfect. Both a perfect descriptor and a perfect patsy. Its frame which is a frame of exclusions is oh so easy to read as an ideological closure. Nothing enters from the outside, there were the political, the economic, the social, foregather. But neither does anything rise up into the graph from below. Its transparency, the logic of its relations, creates a pellucid field, all surface and no depths.” Krauss, 1993b, p. 24.
6. Repetition

The seminar on the gaze in many respects emulates or elaborates on another seminar by Lacan, given a few weeks earlier, and published in the same book, namely the seminar on repetition.\(^{162}\) The notion of the screen, that we saw was important in the seminar on the gaze, is developed in relation to repetition in this initial seminar.\(^{163}\) The ambivalent function of the screen, as both taming and “traumatic,” as discussed previously in relation to perspective, has its counterpart in the “screening” function of repetition. Repetition, as outlined by Lacan, in one sense serves to pacify the traumatic, which here is referred to as the “real”, but it also points to and asserts it.

Foster comments on the traumatic aspects of repetition (with reference to the seminar by Lacan) in relation to certain serial works by Warhol. The following passage indicates how repetition, just like perspective, ambivalently both evokes and represses an underlying trauma:

“For one thing the Warhol repetitions [in his “Death in America” series, showing various disasters] not only reproduce traumatic effects; they also produce them. Somehow in these repetitions, then, several contradictory things occur at the same time: a warding away of traumatic significance and an opening out to it, a defending against traumatic affect and a producing of it.”\(^{164}\)

I want to argue that similar, traumatic repetitions can be traced in Struth’s works, despite the less explicitly shocking subject matter in his images. According to Lacan, repetition as such can indicate an underlying trauma. Compulsive repetition, as we saw in relation to the scopic field in the previous chapter, indicates a fundamentally split and divided subjectivity, and subverts the classical, reflexive model of subjectivity presupposed in traditional perspective:

“… it is necessary to ground … repetition first of all in the very split that occurs in the subject in relation to the [traumatic] encounter. …it enables us to apprehend the real, in its dialectical effects, as originally unwelcome.”\(^{165}\)

\(^{162}\) The seminar is called “The Unconscious and Repetition,” and is published in Op. cit., pp. 17-64.

\(^{163}\) Foster comments explicitly on this: “…The seminar on the gaze, “Of the Gaze as Objet Petit a,” has received more attention than the seminar on the real, but the latter has as much relevance to contemporary art as the former (in any case the two must be read together)...” Op. cit., p. 263, n19.

\(^{164}\) Ibid., p. 132.

\(^{165}\) Lacan, op. cit., p. 69.
Compulsive repetition has long since been connected to trauma within psychoanalytic theory, as Foster also points out in his treatment of repetition in Pop-art. It was initially related to trauma by Freud, who saw it as an attempt to ward off remembrance of a traumatizing memory. It was also related to his notion of the death-drive, which Freud later in his career developed as a compliment to the “pleasure principle,” important in his earlier works. Lacan’s interpretation of compulsive repetition is an elaboration on Freud’s theories.

In my discussion of the traumatic implications of perspective in the previous chapter, I focused on how a single picture or representation can interrupt or pressure established codes for picture making and representation, and evoke a traumatic dimension. In the following, I want to highlight the potentially traumatic aspects involved in the repeated acts of making a group of almost identical photographic images, like the ones by Struth treated in this study.

6.1. Repetition in the images

Repetition is a conspicuous element in the images by Struth under discussion here. All of the images in the series focus on the same type of motif, namely different streets in urban environments. Importantly, they repeat the same rigid compositional structure, with a central street, flanked by rows of houses, surging into the image-space. Struth repeatedly enacts the same process, always placing himself in the middle of the streets, during the early morning hours, while taking his photographs. Seeing many of his images, it is difficult not to be struck by the obsessiveness of his project. Not only is the position and the camera angle identical, the print formats are more or less the same in each image, as well as the film and the lighting – like the Bechers, Struth uses only daylight and takes care to photograph in slightly cloudy weather. Each part of the process, aside from the actual location, in other words is repeated.

However, not only do the different images rehearse a pre-defined pattern of photographing; even within each single frame, there seems to be an element of repetition in the “molecular” structure of the compositions. The houses are reduced to cubes organized in a geometrical pattern. It is a striking effect that this repetitive treatment empties the motifs of meaning. The historical significance, not to mention emotional charge these motifs bring with them, for instance the images of German streets through their connection to recent German history, is effectively

---


167 This notion was developed fully in Freud, 1961.

168 Foster quotes Warhol on the reduction of emotional charge implemented by repetition: “When you see a gruesome picture over and over again, it doesn’t really have any effect.” From interview with Gene Swenson, in “What is Pop-Art? Answers from 8 Painters, Part I,” Art News 62, p. 26. See Foster, op. cit., p. 131.
diminished through the serial approach. This includes the functionalist architecture that we see for instance in *Düsselstrasse, Düsseldorf, 1979* [fig. 9], which replaced the old, destroyed buildings that stood there until the Second World War.

My argument here is that Struth’s images can be interpreted as traumatic in *two* related ways: Both within each picture, through the rigid structuring of the motif (according to the rules of painterly representation, as noted in the previous chapter), and by compulsively repeating a fixed photographic procedure, as I will explain in the following. In Struth’s work, both the rigid composition and the repetition of procedure underline and intensify the traumatic dimension.

### 6.2. Repetition as traumatic

#### 6.2.1. Tuché and Automaton

The ambiguity of repetition, that it *both* evokes and pacifies trauma, is described by Lacan employing the notions *tuché* and *automaton*. The traumatic aspect is expressed by *tuché*. As Lacan says: “We have translated it [*tuché*] as the encounter with the real.”169 *Automaton*, on the other hand, represents the pacifying, screening aspect of repetition: “The real is beyond the *automaton*, [which is] the return, the coming-back, the insistence of the signs, by which we see ourselves governed by the pleasure principle. The real is that which always lies behind the automaton.”170 But this repetitive insistence on significance and representation does not prevent the “*tuché*” from surfacing; the two are intimately connected, just like the two aspects or “cones” of vision in Lacan’s diagram treated in the seminar on the gaze. What according to Lacan “hides” the traumatic aspect of repetition is the fact that it tends to appear as mere *accident*, or chance, without any “real” psychological or traumatic significance. As Lacan says: “What is repeated…always…occurs – the expression tells us a lot about its relation to the *tuché* – as if by chance.”171 Lacan, furthermore, warns that the traumatic aspect of repetition is difficult to detect, since it always conceals itself, and that this is an important challenge in therapy:

---

170 Ibid. The ambivalence of repetition, the fact that it is *both* traumatic and emotionally appealing, can be connected to Freud’s dichotomous notions of the “death drive” and the “pleasure principle” and how these to aspects of emotional life intermingle. To the extent repetition points to the traumatic real, it is connected to the former, and to the extent that it paradoxically can induce pleasure, to the latter. Foster explains: “The symptom [in repetition] hauls back to the same point (Lacan puns on the etymology of Wiederholen, to haul again), but at least this repetition offers us a consistency, even a pleasure. The real, on the other hand, returns violently into the symbolic (again, it cannot be assimilated there) to break us down. As a rupture, it is both ecstatic and deadly, precisely beyond the pleasure principle [*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is also the title of the book where Freud first introduces the death drive], and it must be bound somehow – by the symptom, if nothing else.” Foster, op. cit., p. 264, note 29.
“Repetition is something which, of its true nature, is always veiled in analysis ... We can succeed in unraveling this ambiguity ... only on the basis of the function of the real in repetition. ... Things must not be taken at the level at which the subject puts them – in as much as what we are dealing with is precisely this obstacle, this hitch, that we find at every moment.”

Like the traumatic in vision, then, the traumatic aspects of repetition are tamed or pacified, and emerge only as the symptom of an underlying tension.

I want to argue, furthermore, that repetition has a similar, ambivalent function in Struth's images under study here. In these images, repetition is not an overt “theme,” as it is for instance in conceptual projects such as those of Feldman discussed earlier, or the projects of American conceptual artists using photography such as Dan Graham and Edward Ruscha. The repetitive process is veiled, as it is presented as a mere precondition, in itself insignificant, of achieving objective representation. The repetitive aspect has no other explicit significance than underpinning the “objectivity” of the photographic project.

But at the same time, the repetitive aspect as I see it undermines the apparent emotional neutrality of the project. It does so precisely by seeming compulsive and enforced (this is a subjective judgment, as I shall return to). Echoing what Foster says about Warhol’s silkscreen prints elsewhere, Struth’s images “appear repetitive, automatic even technological.”

The fixation on the technological within the Neue Sachlichkeit movement in general, as we have seen, borders on the fetishistic and obsessive, according to Benjamin for instance. This is no less obvious in Struth’s work – quite on the contrary. Struth’s work stresses seriality and mechanical repetition to an even greater extent than these earlier photographers and also in that respect exceeds conventional limits for architectural photography.

6.2.2. Repetition as the “missed” encounter

As in the seminar on the gaze, the traumatic in the seminar on repetition is defined negatively, as a missed encounter with the real. Repetition functions as a compensation for this unattainable or impossible encounter. This corresponds to how one could interpret the traumatic aspects in Struth’s images, which do not figure as such, other than perhaps negatively, as a lack or absence, in his repeated depictions of rather dull street motifs.

As Lacan puts it: “The subject in himself, the recalling of his biography, all this goes only to a

172 Ibid, pp. 54-55.
173 Foster, op. cit., p. 134.
174 Benjamin, op. cit.
certain limit, which is known as the real.”  

Lacan also gives this a Cartesian gloss at one point, which also connects the real to optics and the gaze: “…the real is that which always comes back to the same place – to the place where the subject in so far as he thinks, where the res cogitans, does not meet it.” Here he again relates to the dichotomy between the Cartesian cogito and the unconscious, or the “real”, and how these are tightly interrelated.

A fundamental assumption for Lacan, related both to his discussion of the gaze and repetition is that the real per definition is not accessible for representation. Repetition, in fact functions as a negation or subversion of representation, and it is at the point where the repetitive aspect unintentionally subverts the representational that the traumatic emerges:

“I will take the opportunity to point out to you that in Freud’s texts repetition is not reproduction. There is never any ambiguity on this point: Wiederholen is not Reproduzieren. …what Freud showed when he made his next steps – and it did not take him long – was that nothing [that is real, and not imaginary] can be grasped … except …in effigie, in absentia.”

Furthermore, Lacan points out that repetition, as the negation of representation, manifests itself as action or an act:

“Repetition first appears in a form that is not clear, that is not self-evident, like a reproduction, or a making present, in act. That is why I have placed The Act with a large question-mark at the bottom of the blackboard so as to indicate that, as long as we speak of the relations of repetition with the real, this act will remain on our horizon.”

And this act also connects it to the real: “…an act, a true act, always has an element of structure, by the fact of concerning a real that is not self-evidently caught up in it.” At stake in my reading of Struth’s Strassen photographs, then, is that his images slide, due to their obsessive, methodical features, from representation to repetition, and thereby reveal an underlying traumatic aspect.

This entails a change in the conception of his works, from traditional iconic images, to mere traces, or indications of the act of making them. Rather than investigating the historical and

---

176 Foster, op. cit., p. 141.
177 Lacan, op. cit., p. 49.
178 Ibid., p. 50.
179 Ibid.
180 Ibid.
emotional aspects of the places depicted the images are emptied of meaning through the repetitive action of making them. The way the images are composed support this interpretation; as I have pointed out previously, they present no real subject-matter, no action or events, but rather appear as empty stages, without narrative or emotional contents. The motifs seem almost like accidentally chosen proxies employed to perform a ritualized procedure. This, again, recalls a statement from Lacan’s seminar discussed here: "Only a rite, an endlessly repeated act, can commemorate this not very memorable encounter … that is to say, no conscious being."\(^{181}\)

As Foster describes the traumatic in Warhol’s images, it is not so much located in the violent scenes depicted there, as in small, insignificant details, which divert attention from the explicit contents: it is the popping and tearing in the surface of the prints that signal the underlying traumatic dimension, and not the disturbing subject-matter in itself:

> “These pops [in Warhol’s silkscreen prints], such as a slipping of register or a washing in color, serve as visual equivalents of our missed encounters with the real.”\(^{182}\)

To the extent the rippings and pops in the surface of the images divert attention from the content of the images, they are interrupted through *tuchic* interference. The comfort of the realistic, cognitive representation or narrative closure is thus effectively undermined, accentuating the traumatic dimension underlying the repetitive act itself. As Foster says in relation Warhol:

> “Repetition in Warhol … serves to *screen* the real understood as traumatic. But this very need also *points* to the real, and at this point the real *ruptures* the screen of repetition.”\(^{183}\)

### 6.2.3. Remembrance and repetition

An aspect of repetition, as outlined by Lacan in this seminar, is that it functions as a repression of the memory of historical or biographical events. As Lacan explains, at a certain point in the process of remembrance in analytic treatment, when the patient approaches the core of a trauma, repetition sets in as a pre-emptive defense against a traumatic memory:

> “…in these first stages of [therapeutic] experience in which remembering is gradually substituted for itself and approaches ever nearer to a sort of focus, or centre, in which every event seems to be under an obligation to yield itself – precisely at this moment, we

---

\(^{181}\) Ibid., p. 59.

\(^{182}\) Ibid., p. 134.

\(^{183}\) Foster, op. cit., p. 132.
see manifest itself what I will also call...the *resistance of the subject*, which becomes at that moment repetition in act.”

Whereas on the one hand repetition is initiated by a process of recollection, on the other, it intervenes in, and subverts this process. Lacan is here in line with how Freud first developed the notion of compulsive repetition, in relation to remembrance in therapy. Struth has made statements that support a reading of his project as compulsive repetition emerging out of a process of remembrance. Furthermore, it is difficult not to see a historical, commemorative aspect in his works, which focus on historical buildings, although some are of recent date. These latter at least indirectly can be connected to the war, since they point to the destroyed buildings that they replaced. But here, as Buchloh pointed out in relation to the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher in the text referred to in the introduction, remembrance is blocked by the repetitive action of producing a vast photographic series. This is of course to move onto (even more) speculative ground. But on the other hand, from the vantage point of Lacan’s seminars treated in this study, trauma does not itself necessarily have to be connected to a specific content, as we have seen previously. In other words the compulsive repetition of realistic photographs in Struth’s works by itself provides material for a “traumatic” interpretation of his images. Within the framework of these seminars by Lacan, it is the symptoms that indicate the traumatic, such as compulsive repetition, and not necessarily what is repeated as such.

### 6.3. Trauma as subjective effect

There is, finally, another premise that is important in Foster’s reading of Pop-art and Superrealism, as well as in Lacan’s seminars, namely that the breakdown of the screen, and the irruption of the real, ultimately is a subjective experience. Therefore, I should at this point rephrase my hypothesis somewhat and specify that Struth’s images provoke a traumatic breakdown of the conventions of realistic photography for me. But rather than being purely personal, this experience is also determined by cultural codes; I have already noted that the screen, which mediates the traumatic for the subject is interpreted as “conventions of representation,” valid for the members of a given society in general. It is precisely in the interaction between the subject and the social field that the traumatic emerges, as described by Lacan. In pointing out the subjective aspect of his traumatic interpretation of contemporary art, Foster explicitly refers to Roland Barthes’ book

---

184 Ibid., p. 51.
185 This theory was initially presented in “Rememberance, Repeating and Working-Through.” Freud, 1957, vol. 12.
186 See interview by Reust, op. cit.
on photography, *Camera Lucida*, which has been connected directly to Lacan’s seminars discussed in this study, by the American art historian Margareth Iversen.\(^\text{187}\)

In this book by Barthes, the response to a photograph is described through the dual notions *stadium* and *punctum*.\(^\text{188}\) *Studium* is a mode of relating to a photograph where it seems replete with meaning, communicating effectively within the framework of cultural convention. It could be paralleled with Lacan’s notion *automaton*, which we saw was the signifier that incessantly and automatically produces meaning, glossing over any underlying traumatic tensions. *Punctum*, on the other hand, represents the breakdown of photographic interpretation, and implies a similar type of emotionally charged rupture as Lacan describes through the notion *tuché*, that we saw represented the “appearance” of the real. The *punctum* also immediately subverts and undermines the coherence of the photographic contents or narrative. Foster describes the ambiguously cultural and subjective experience of trauma in art as follows, equating Lacanian and Barthesian terminology:

> “This confusion about the location of the rupture, *tuché*, or *punctum*, is a confusion of subject and the world, inside and outside. It is an aspect of trauma; indeed it may be this confusion that *is* traumatic.”\(^\text{189}\)

Barthes connects *punctum* to details of content in realistic photographs. Should one attempt to describe the traumatic irruptions in Struth’s images using Barthesian terminology, there is, for me, a *punctum* in the vanishing point, designated by the “orthogonals” drawn by the receding lines in the streets and architecture. In general, all that point to his attempts to render his images realistic or objective through the use of perspective, however anachronistic this may seem, subvert his project and reveal underlying tensions.


\(^{188}\) Barthes, 2001.

\(^{189}\) Foster, op. cit., p. 134.
7. Conclusion

Even though I have chosen to focus on a limited number of images in this study, and only a few theoretical texts, the scope of this reading might have been extended. As Buchloh has shown, the works of the Bechers invite a similar traumatic interpretation. But the photographs Struth has produced since at least the mid eighties do not seem to conform to the same rigid compositional rules, nor stress the conventions of photographic representation generally, to the same extent as his earlier works. Nor are they as obsessively repetitive as the earlier, and thus on the whole seem difficult to relate to the “traumatic” perspective outlined in this study. His later works are often more narrative as well, for instance his images of city squares. These are monumental in format and much more complex than his earlier works, often including masses of people and recognizable, even iconic motifs such as Times Square in New York and Tiananmen Square in Beijing. This makes them much more easily consumable and visually appealing, thereby neutralizing or dissolving the tensions in his earlier photographs.

Struth’s own success as an artist, along with that of many other Becherschool photographers, has contributed to making his photographs more familiar and thus also less challenging for contemporary audiences. The theoretical model used in this study is specific, in the sense that it presupposes a given cultural context that specific artworks disrupt or undermine, in one way or another. And it is the location of Struth’s project in seventies and early eighties in Germany, that makes interpretation suggested here is most pertinent. As Becherschool photography has become universally accepted as “fine-art,” and at the same time highly sought after sales articles on the international art market, numerous other artists has adopted their photographic style, creating a new environment for this type of photography. Becherschool photography today is attached to a completely different set of connotations than it was thirty years ago when the first Strassen photographs emerged. And this difference is as I see it sufficient to divest any similar, contemporary project from these traumatic aspects. As Freud makes clear in his essay “The Uncanny,” the traumatic is inherently dependent on appearing unrecognizable, yet familiar at the same time.190 The status of Becherschool photography today on the international art scene, is precisely that it is recognizable and familiar through and through.191

190 Freud discussed the etymology of the term Das Unheimliche in the beginning of this text, pointing out this ambiguity, and its psychological significance. See Freud, 2003. Lacan is as mentioned inspired directly by Freud, and the ambiguity of the screen, as we have seen, recalls the ambivalent familiar/unfamiliar nature of the “uncanny.”
191 For a discussion of the Becherschool’s influence on contemporary Norwegian photography and on their works contemporary status today as fine art commodities, se my “Meet the Parents” on Kunstkritikk.no. (Precise location on the internet is: http://kunstkritikk.no/kk/anmeldelser_comments.php?id=416_0_21_0_C)
If one chooses to interpret realistic photography from the vantage point of Lacan’s seminars on repetition and the gaze, one also immediately questions its inherent claim to representational transparency. To interpret Struth’s photographs in this way is therefore to fundamentally question the validity of his project and some of the basic tenets it is based on. As pointed out initially, as much as relating to art history, this study is related to the criticism of photography, and describes, at least implicitly, how these images function in a given social and historical context, related to current or even hegemonic cultural constructions, what Lacan calls the “Symbolic.” As I have argued here, Struth’s images to some extent challenge hegemonic representational conventions, and thereby simultaneously provoke a questioning of them. But, as George Baker argues in his analysis of Sander’s photographs, this happens precisely at the expense of the artists explicit intentions.

“This narrative circulation is not, as Sander intended, the circle of “unmediated truth” … Dialectically embodied in his photographs, there exists the result of the crisis of Sander’s photographic ambivalence [combining the “stasis” of photographical reproduction with the “narrative” of social decay]… The political potential of his photography thus comes only from emptying out his intentions, and from seeing in his work something that he never actually achieved but which exists behind his disavowals – and through the effect of the history to which his work inevitably attests.”192

This is also how I see the “politics” of Struth’s works; the most interesting and significant aspect of his project is precisely that he (inadvertently) demonstrates the impossibility of objective photography in contemporary art or culture at large, and in so doing he invites the beholder to reflect upon the conditions of this impossibility.

192 Baker, op. cit., p. 112.
Bibliography

Literature on Struth


Ziegler, Ulf Erdmann. ”The Bechers’ Industrial Lexicon,” *Art in America*, June 2002
General Literature


Iversen, Margareth. “What is a Photograph?” Art History vol. 17 (September 1994), s. 450-463.


Kroksnes, Andrea. The Photographical Turn, www.forart.no


