



Universität
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Research Project

Aesthetics from the Margins. Photography in Africa and the Poetics of Un/Making the World

Third-party funded project

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Aesthetics from the margins embarks on an historical inquiry into the place of photography in cultural ways of world-making in Africa. The project proceeds on the assumption that while “the world” is economically, politically and socially produced it nevertheless needs to be perceived, sensed, comprehended and made sense of. The world is, in other words, more than a mere reality, fact or given, but the result of continuous making and remaking. The ability to imagine the world and one’s own place within it – individually and collectively – rests upon diverse repertoires of images, signs and symbols, idioms and narratives, media and social practices. It hence goes without saying that there has been a long-standing interest in world-making across various disciplines – among them history, philosophy, anthropology, religious, literary and cultural studies – to understand how precisely people make world(s), and how experiencing the world is linked to ideation, knowledge production, subjectivity and consciousness. But, as has recently been noted, in the so-called “age of globalisation” and “media society”, and in the context of a growing preoccupation with the world’s complexity and opacity, and presently its political, economic and ecological fragility, the question of world-making is of particular importance to both the humanities and social sciences, and society at large. Proposing a study of African colonial and postcolonial photography as a contribution to this recent debate on globalization, the media and world-making cannot forebear, perhaps, to speak from a position of double marginality: “Africa” is often considered to be the historical and contemporary “recipient” of globalization, as opposed to its initiators, and even those who do insist on the continent’s historically accrued place and role in the making of the world emphasise, as we shall see, economic and political issues rather than “esoteric” questions of aesthetics and visuality. Yet, it is precisely the assumed marginality of Africa and photography that clears a space for a critical reassessment of how we ground our thinking about history, the world, and the global.

Keywords Visuality, History, Africa, Aesthetics, Theory from the South

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