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Mystery, Spirit and Reflection - the Meaning of Blurredness ¹

„Can a blurred photograph really be an image of a person?

Is it always an advantage if a blurred picture is replaced by one with perfect definition.

Isn't the lack of definition often precisely what we need?“

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 71

But why - taking Wittgenstein's questions a step further – should we need blurred pictures? What part can they possibly play? Yet this in itself provokes more questions: Isn't a blurred photograph simply a mistake and lacking in something? And doesn't one give blurred prints immediately back to the photographer so as not to have to pay for them? Moreover most current handbooks on ›correct‹ photography treat blur as a mistake; images in which the subject is



›Guardian Angel‹
Print on Aluminum
Joerg Maxzin, 1999



›Au concert
européen‹
Georges Seurat
1887

out of focus are regarded just as faulty as eyes that are far sighted or near sighted or impaired by old age. So an image is expected to show exactly what one can perceive with perfect eyesight and maybe even more: While the eye only focuses on a particular section of its range of vision perceiving everything else less clearly, a photograph is supposed to show every detail clearly whether it is located in the center, at the edge, in the foreground or in the background. So the image is seen as a mere means of communicating information: The more details one can perceive, the more exact the information about appearance, shape or facture, the better it is. But just as words cannot be limited to their descriptive function so images can't be restricted to conveying information about what a thing or a person looks like. Images can indeed do a lot more: They can function as signals, they can decorate something, they can explain something, they can be revered as remnants of the past or even be worshipped as something Godly or they can stimulate moods and emotions. Only someone with a very limited concept of an image who overlooks all its other possible usages will reject blur from the beginning as a mistake.

However, blurred pictures haven't always been around, and strictly speaking, they are quite a modern phenomenon. It is true that baroque artists deliberately neglected delineating the contours of their subjects placing their main emphasis on color or light instead. Yet not all pictures in which the contours are not clearly defined can be called blurred. To create such an impres-

sion the edges must become indistinct, colored areas must merge diffusely or the colors must assume a pastel quality so that the subject appears to be somewhat dissolved and slightly immaterial. In this sense Georges Seurat was probably one of the first artists to make blurred pictures. Even more than his pointillist paintings in which the objects dissolve into a shimmer because starkly contrasting colored dots are placed next to each other, his chalk drawings can be seen as excellent examples of blurredness. Here the foreground and background merge almost inseparably and



›La Pêcheuse‹
Georges Seurat
1884

since the rough surface of the paper only allows the chalk to color the higher sections, a stark contrast between light and dark is created and simultaneously an oscillating shimmer or glitter that makes the subjects – the audience at a concert (*comp.* ›Au concert européen‹) or a lady (*vgl.* ›La Pêcheuse‹) – turn into an almost spaceless and immaterial event. Since the figures are mostly seen as silhouettes against the light details are lost. So the figures are only vague shapes and shadows, hardly stimuli, but rather reflections that are not really present and therefore of doubtful yet interesting ontological status.



›Lily F. with spirit form, perhaps of the spanish girl Minia, who had died in Santiago‹
1897



›Medium William Eglinton mit Materialisation mit Turban‹
A. N. Aksakow
1886

At about the same time as Seurat introduced blurredness into graphic arts there was a whole genre in photography that devoted itself expressly to vague shapes and shadows, i.e. the so-called ›ghost‹ photography. Its popularity can be explained by the fact that in the euphoria of the 19th century photography was thought to be able not only to record what was visible to the ordinary human eye but also that which was invisible. Why should the photosensitive plate not be able to record other rays or light beyond the perceptual range of the human eye? And so since the 1850s it has been claimed repeatedly that with the aid of photography the ghosts of the dead could be made visible – the vague faces or figures of close relatives or dead neighbors allegedly appeared in portrait photography. It often seemed that a medium was needed to make a spirit materialize to the extent that it could be recorded on a photographic plate. Of course, it was inexplicable photo chemical reactions that led to mysterious effects on the plate and more often it was simply fakes which fascinated the public. In any case the spiritual element in the ›ghost‹ photographs is always blurred, often somewhat dif-

fused and not clearly defined in space (*comp.* ›*Lily F.*‹); sometimes the relationships in space are not altogether clear and it is even difficult to make out which figure is supposed to be the medium and which the ghost (*comp.* ›*Medium William Eglington*‹). So everything is out of focus and blurred, some parts of the photograph are quite dark, others, however, seem to be overexposed; above all the faces (just as with Seurat) can only be made out rather vaguely, which, of course, made everything seem even more mysterious.



›*Auguste Rodin*‹
Edward Steichen
1902

If blur was used here as an almost inevitable stylistic element to depict something supernatural and incorporeal, similar examples have since appeared again and again outside the field of ghost photography. When, for example, Edward Steichen took a series of photos of Auguste Rodin at the beginning of the 20th century he deliberately portrayed him as a genius and his works as mysterious, spiritual creations (*comp.* ›*Auguste Rodin*‹). Thus the sculpture of Victor Hugo appears above Rodin's silhouette like a phantom, the only brightness surrounded by complete darkness, not so much a figure as light and movement – a supernatural flash of inspiration as it were. This almost anticipates the thought bubbles in comics where the content is often only indicated with dotted lines – ›blurred‹ as it were – to hint at the purely virtual character of the thoughts. In this way Steichen doesn't show the finished work of art in front of which the proud artist presents himself, what is important to him is to convey the idea that the sculpture is the product of an immensely powerful imagination.

Apart from the attempt to present something supernatural, non-material or in some way or other unreal, there are several other types of pictures where blurredness plays an important part. Press photographers like using it because the picture then appears to have been taken hastily under extreme conditions. In this case blur is a sign of extraordinary circumstances or a sensational event and adds both drama and authenticity to the photograph. A clear and well-composed picture taken by a paparazzo would thus be just as unconvincing as a well-defined picture of a war scene or a UFO.

The 20th century looking for surprising effects discovered many other different forms and functions of blur which in the meantime are often combined. This development was further promoted by the fact that the 20th century was the age of abstraction. Illusionism was abandoned and the images were liberated in the sense that they no longer had to represent objects in a realistic manner. The more abstract works became established in art and altered our traditional perception of things, the more easily we have become capable of



›Kleine Badende‹
Gerhard Richter
1994

›reading‹ blurred pictures in which space also loses depth and whose narrative quality is reduced in favor of emotive values. If an object is blurred or at least partly blurred a painting or a photograph takes on an abstract quality and is perceived as two-dimensional rather than three-dimensional. But there is still a recognizable relation to the real object and that is why a blurred picture in the final analysis can be interpreted as a synthesis of the traditions of representational and abstract art. A certain familiarity with both types of pictures is necessary to appreciate such a picture and blur is even a suitable means to reflect upon what a picture is and does. Since it is not the intention of blurred pictures to realistically depict something but to let blur appear as a ›disturbance‹, the image itself as a medium becomes the predominant theme. It is, above all, Gerhard Richter who frequently uses blur in such a way that the observer can experience what it takes for a picture to become the image of something (comp. ›Kleine Badende‹).

Wittgenstein's question as to whether we need blurred pictures can be answered unequivocally and in several ways: Many things can be expressed by nothing better than by the use of blurredness. Joerg Maxzin's works also provide answers to this question and they also relate to the pictures mentioned in this essay. Nymphs and Guardian Angels, the mysterious state of what is present in our imagination or memory, no less than the deliberate switching back and forth between the abstract and the representational – all this, simultaneously, is Joerg Maxzin's theme and revolves around blurredness in particular. Anyone still doubting whether blur is perhaps more a mistake than a quality may possibly be persuaded by Goethe to change his mind who, in ›Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre‹, expresses his skepticism – well-documented elsewhere – about looking at things with perfect definition, thus pleading at least indirectly for blurredness: „Whenever I look through a pair of glasses I am a different person and I don't like myself; I see more than I am supposed to see – the world seen more clearly is no longer in harmony with my inner world and I quickly put aside my glasses when my curiosity as to what this or that thing in the distance looks like has been satisfied.“

1 published in: exhibition catalogue ›Joerg Maxzin - Offspring‹
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2 Ludwig Wittgenstein: ›Philosophische Untersuchungen‹
Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1980, S. 60