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Blaxploitation in brazilian photography?  
Images of slavery by the Alberto Henschel studio

Elaborate aristocratic portraits taken in front of artificially painted backdrops, images of slaves working in sugarcane fields or carrying everyday or even unusual objects – a piano, a set of baskets or an umbrella – on their heads, black wet nurses with white babies: these are common themes in the photographic representation of Africans in Brazil. The photographs set standards in the production of specific images of slavery and its personnel, the afrodescendants, in postcolonial Brazil. Due to the close connections between definitions of realism and photography in traditional western thought, photographs are, to a great extent, perceived as providing a "realistic" or even "real" depiction of their subjects. The underlying concepts of realism, their function in a given historical situation and their transformation in cross-cultural contexts form the crucial point of the study presented here. Is it possible that the traditions of perception and representation known from African photography influence photography in Brazil? The enduring effect of these images on the actual social role of Blacks in Brazil is also addressed.

These topics are explored on the basis of the photographic works of Alberto Henschel (1827-1882). Henschel ran a number of very successful studios during the period from 1866 to 1882 in various cities throughout Brazil. Besides photographers like Christiano Junior, Rodolpho Lindemann, Guilherme Gaensly and Marc Ferrez, Henschel produced numerous portraits of slaves and former slaves in Brazil. His photographs had spread widely by the end of the 19th century. Initially, the photographs will be recorded and interpreted with the aid of a serial-iconographic model. Terms and methods for the use of photographs as historical sources for social anthropological analysis will also be discussed. Finally, a discourse analysis of the photographs and their methods of publication will offer new data on the consequences of the photographic representation of slavery in the late 19th century and on the modelling impact of photography on social action in general.

Photography played a major role in the social and political development of 19th century Brazil. In the course of political independence in 1822, the process of building a national identity started. It was not only important to define a new political, economic and cultural order, but also to establish a position regarding the system of slavery which in 1889 was a grave heritage for the first Brazilian republic. Brazil in an official act in May 1888 was the last nation worldwide to abandon slavery. Brazil is thus with Cuba one of the few states in which there exists an appreciable number of photographic documents revealing a society based on slavery. The paper analyzes whether there was a specific photographic method of dealing with the system of slavery which had otherwise largely been eliminated throughout the rest of the world by the middle of 19th century.

Photograph by Henschel & Benque, c. 1869, courtesy: Biblioteca Nacional, Rio de Janeiro

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studied cultural anthropology in Göttingen and Munich and is actually working on a thesis on history of brazilian photography. Collaboration in the exhibition "Snap me one! Studiofotografen in Afrika" (Münchener Stadtmuseum 1998). Working at the Photographic Archive of Deutsches Museum Munich.

Publications (among others):

Tobias Wendl and M.P.: "'Observers are worried'. Fotokulissen aus Ghana", in: Tobias Wendl and Heike Behrend (eds.), Snap me one! Studiofotografen in Afrika, München/London/New York 1998 (Prestel Verlag); M.P.: "Fernweh und volle Kassen. Feldnotizen aus der Reise-Diavortragsszene", in: Wulf Köpke and Bernd Schmelz (eds.), Ethnographie Afrikas. Ethnographische Photographie, Bonn 1999 (Holos); M.P. and Wolfgang Till (eds.): Neger im Louvre. Texte zu Kunstethnographie und moderner Kunst, Amsterdam/Dresden 2001 (Verlag der Kunst)