

‘Kodak Shirley is the Norm’

On Racism and Photography

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to investigate to what extent photography can be considered racist in relation to the color photography of the 1950s. By focusing on the Polaroid ID-2 camera and the Kodak Shirley cards that were used by photographers in the 1950s, this article shows how the color photography of the 1950s was connected to a normativity of ‘whiteness’. By the use of Foucault’s concept of ‘biopower’, I will show how the South African government used the Polaroid ID-2 camera for ‘Pass Books’ by which a system of racial segregation was maintained. On a more abstract level, I will show by the use of two case studies that early color photography can be placed in a context of mediations of the racialized body, in which the black body has a long history of being classified. This raises questions about the myth of the photographic truth and the objectivity of technology, which I will address in this article. I will conclude that photography as a medium is influenced by the discourse of society and is at the same time able to influence this discourse itself. This makes it possible to understand how photography can be considered racist.

KEYWORDS

Biopower, racism, whiteness, photography, South-Africa.



ILLUSTRATION | I.D. 4 (Broomberg & Chanarin 2012)

In April 2015 I visited a photo exhibition by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin: 'To Photograph the Details of a Dark Horse in Low Light'. I looked at the photos without reading the descriptions and thought that they were 'just' pretty pictures of plants in the dark. Later I found out that these photos were not as innocent as they looked. The artists, Broomberg and Chanarin, used a vintage Polaroid ID-2 camera to take them. This camera has a button to add extra flash light, which was installed to make dark-skinned people visible on photographs. These photographs played a role in the oppression of black people during apartheid in South-Africa. The aim of the exhibition was to examine "the radical notion that prejudice might be inherent in the medium of photography itself" (Smith 2013). Thereby they touch upon an urgent question about the entanglement of power relations in technology. I consider this an important question to investigate, since photography is often seen as an 'objective' medium because of its ability to reflect reality quite accurately (Sturken and Cartwright 2009). What if the materiality of the technology is influenced by racist ideas? How objective is such a technology when it is used in a racist context?

In this article, I will look at the collision of power and technology in 1950s color photography, and focus on the Polaroid ID-2 camera and the Kodak Shirley cards as case studies. In my search for literature on this topic, I found that there is very limited academic research that links the Polaroid ID-2 camera and the Kodak Shirley cards, which are used in the production of color photography, to the normativity of whiteness and racist ideologies. With this article I aim to broaden this literature by discussing to what extent photography can be considered racist in relation to the color photography of the 1950s. I will argue that this case shows a racialized bias that regards white skin as the norm and is discriminatory against people with a dark skin.

In the first section I will give a description of the color photography in the 1950s, in which the Kodak Shirley cards played a key role, and discuss how it is connected to 'whiteness' as a norm. In the second section I will discuss, using Foucault's notion of biopower, how the government of South Africa used the Polaroid ID-2 camera as a tool to maintain the regime of apartheid. Then I will place the case study in a context of mediations of the racialized body, and show how the black body has a long history of classification. In the third section I will use these findings to discuss the myth of the photographic truth and the objectivity of technology.

THE NORMALITY OF WHITENESS IN 1950S COLOR PHOTOGRAPHY

In the 1950s it became more common in Western countries to use color photography. While it seemed to give a more truthful reflection of reality than black and white photography, there was a problem with photographing dark-skinned people. Photographs of people with white skin showed a lot of details, while the details of people with dark skin, except for their white eyes and teeth, were erased. The Polaroid ID-2 camera had a ‘boost button’ that was designed to solve this problem; pressing the button led to an increased flash which made people with a dark skin visible on photographs (O’Toole 2014). The fact that this button was installed as an ‘extra’ tool on the camera and was missing on other types of cameras, suggests that cameras were primarily designed to photograph white-skinned people.

This light-skin biased aspect of color photography is reinforced by the ‘Kodak Shirley’ cards that are used in the practice of color balancing. These cards, showing a woman with light skin wearing a colorful and high-contrasted dress, serve as a tool for calibrating and measuring the skin tones on a photo. “The light skin tones of these women – named ‘Shirley’ by male industry users after the name of the first color test-strip-card model – have been recognized skin ideal standard for most North American analogue photo labs since the early part of the twentieth century and they continue to function as the dominant norm” (Roth 2009, 112). This normativity of the white skin explains why it was so hard to see details of people with black skin on a photograph. The technology of photography was designed on the basis of a global assumption of ‘whiteness’ as norm and towards this norm other skin colors were made deviant (Roth 2009). The ‘Shirley card’ that Broomberg and Chanarin use in their exhibition¹ is quite striking in this context; the word ‘normal’ is literally placed on the photo. In the 1950s, when the market of color photography was developing, the target consumer market consisted of white-skinned people (Roth 2009). If the medium of photography had been designed with dark-



ILLUSTRATION 2 Shirley 1 (Broomberg & Chanarin 2012)

¹ More examples of the Kodak Shirley cards can be found at <http://www.broombergchanarin.com/to-photograph-a-dark-horse/>.

skinned people in mind, the color balancing might have been developed differently.

The conception of whiteness as a norm is elaborately discussed by Richard Dyer. In ‘The Matter of Whiteness’ he states that the concept of race is used to designate non-white people. White people are “not racially seen and named” (Dyer 1997, 1-2), and therefore they are seen as the human standard or norm. This gives white people a very powerful position. Since they are the standard, the ‘just human’, they “claim to speak for the commonality of humanity” (Dyer 1997, 2). As a result, everyone who is not white is always imperfect and deviating from the norm. This powerful position of whiteness is visible in all kinds of Western representations, such as advertisements, films and television shows. Since most representations show people with white skin, this is considered ‘normal’; the whiteness stays unnoticed. Dyer states that white people are not presented as part of the white race, but simply as humans. “White people have power and believe that they think, feel and act like and for all people; white people, unable to see their particularity, cannot take account of other people’s; white people create the dominant images of the world and don’t quite see that they thus construct the world in their own image [...]” (Dyer 1997, 9).

Dyer’s ideas about whiteness can be used to understand the case study. The ‘Kodak Shirley’ cards show clearly how whiteness functions as a norm. The cards were used by all sorts of photographers, which gives Shirley a notion of universality. Pictures with many different people are compared to Shirley; she thus represents ‘the human’ who is being photographed. The result of the light-skin biased technology, which was produced for a white consumer market, is that most dominant images represent and repeat this norm of ‘whiteness’. This confirms Dyer’s statement that the dominant images of the world are constructed to the image of white people. Furthermore, this case shows how the materiality of technology itself is influenced by economic and cultural considerations and norms.

The development of 1950s color photography is centered on the white-skinned subject, which leads to a confirmation of whiteness as a norm. As a result, dark-skinned people are disadvantaged since they cannot be pictured in detail without the use of a special flash light. Furthermore, the imagery that is the result of 1950s color photography establishes black people as deviant while confirming a normativity of whiteness. Therefore, I argue that the material qualities of the ‘Kodak Shirley’ cards and the Polaroid ID-2 camera of the 1950s are influenced by, and maintain, racism against people with a dark skin.

THE CLASSIFICATION OF THE BLACK BODY

In the previous paragraph I discussed the racist material qualities of early color photography. Now I turn to the cultural use of the Polaroid ID-2 camera in the context of South Africa, to investigate to what extent photography can be used for racist practices. As I explained before, the Polaroid ID-2 camera had a ‘boost button’ which led to an increase of flash in order to make dark skin visible on photos. However, this camera was used by the South African government for a very problematic purpose. It was used in the time of the apartheid regime, the system of racial segregation (from 1948 to 1994)², to photograph black citizens. These photos were used on ‘Pass Books’: identification documents that the black South Africans were obliged to carry with them everywhere (Savage 1986). They were for example not able to stay more than 72 hours in ‘white’ areas without permission, which was recorded in the Pass Books. This enabled the apartheid government to control the marginalized part of the population at all times (O’Toole 2014; Smith 2013). As a result, the technology of the Polaroid ID-2 camera obtained a certain political meaning. Via its use for the production of Pass Books, the camera indirectly supported a system of racial segregation. The specific case of photographing dark-skinned people with the aim of controlling them can be placed in a long history of state control and classification of human beings on the basis of ‘race’. I will discuss this history and apply it to the specific context of the Polaroid ID-2 camera, to show that its use by the South-African government helped to maintain a system of racial segregation.

During the apartheid regime, the government classified the population into different groups on the basis of their ‘race’, enabling it to manage and control the population (Dubrow 1992). According to Foucault, the managing of the population by institutions is a characteristic aspect of the modern nation state. He refers to this as ‘biopower’, which is the enactment of power on a population through regulating individual human beings (Foucault 1967). This power is focused on the well-being of a part of the population, which must be ‘made live’. However, this amelioration of the lives of some leads to an exclusion of others. This is what Foucault calls ‘state racism’ (Foucault 1976); it is a way of regulating who must live and who must die in order to improve the lives of those who are considered to be superior. By this regulation the population is fragmented into different groups, rendering one part inferior and the other part superior. Norms are a central tool to accomplish this, since they create a point of reference towards which individual bodies can be measured and defined as right or deviant (Foucault 1976). In the context of the apartheid regime, ‘whiteness’ was the norm, which meant that the black population was seen as deviant and inferior (Dubrow 1992). The practice of biopower thus produces a certain knowledge about the subjects that it controls. When the notion of biopower is used to understand the power structures in the

² Apartheid was the system of racial segregation in South Africa, which was based on institutionalised legislation that placed the white minority of the country in a ruling position, while oppressing the coloured and black majority of the population.

apartheid regime, it becomes clear that the regime controls its population and focuses on the well-being of the white South-Africans, thereby excluding the other part of the population. This process of regulating and classification was (amongst others) made possible by the Pass Books, with portrait photos that were only obligated for black people. They maintained a separation of the population, of which only one part was limited in freedom through the obligation to bring with them these identification documents. Knowledge about and power over the black population was produced on the basis of these Pass Books. Photography was thus an important tool to enable the process of classification of human beings into 'inferior' and 'superior' races. However, this is not unique to the apartheid regime: "Photography's use in systems set up to classify people is an important aspect of the history of photography" (Sturken and Cartwright 2009, 357).

The idea that humans can be divided into different racial groups was developed in the science of the nineteenth century. An influential example of such a classification is John Beddoe's 'The Races of Man', which presents a depiction of the different human races, with Europeans regarded as the 'most intelligent' and African people as on a 'lower evolutionary scale' (Sturken and Cartwright 2009). A similar argument is made in Arthur de Gobineau's essay 'An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Race', which argued that the European race was 'supreme' (Kale 2010). In these systems of classification, people were judged on the basis of their outward appearances, with a focus on skin color. The systems of classification were interpreted as 'scientific foundations' of racist ideas. In these studies, black people were considered to be primitive and unable to control their sexuality (Gilman 1985). Black women in particular were connected to notions of animal-like sexuality and were placed on the opposite of Western 'rational' humans (Gilman 1985). Here again a normativity of whiteness can be distinguished (Dyer 1997). While black and colored 'races' belonged to 'lower evolutionary scales', the 'white race' was considered to be superior and rational (Sturken and Cartwright 2009). Photography functioned as an important tool to capture the appearance of the bodies that were investigated and classified. The notion of objectivity that is attached to photography (Benjamin [1931] 1999; Bazin and Grey 1960, Sturken and Cartwright 2009) enabled an appreciation of these photos as a reliable basis for scientific research. Thus, also in the larger context of systems of classifications, photography was used as a means to reinforce racist ideologies. The Polaroid ID-2 camera seems to be a continuation in this racist history of classifications.

It can thus be concluded that the case of the Polaroid ID-2 camera shows how the cultural use of this technology in the context of South Africa led to a confirmation of racism. Furthermore, the case can be understood from a larger context in which, throughout history, photography has been used as a tool to create and maintain racist ideologies.

PHOTOGRAPHY AS AN OBJECTIVE TECHNOLOGY

Photography has always been connected to notions of objectivity and realism (Benjamin [1931] 1999; Bazin and Grey 1960; Sturken and Cartwright 2009). The development of photography took place in the time that positivism was the dominant scientific discourse. According to positivism, scientific (empirical) knowledge is the only 'real' knowledge that can say something about the world. This resulted in a large faith in machines, known as 'machine objectivity', since they were regarded as more objective than individual human perception. Since photographs were made by a machine, rather than a painter or sculptor, they were considered to be reliable and objective representations. The camera thus became a scientific tool that was able to give an unmediated and objective representation of reality (Sturken and Cartwright 2009). Roland Barthes noticed that photography has a truth function, which he calls the 'noeme'; a photograph connects something that existed in history (the object, place or person on which the light reflected) to something that exists now (the image itself). "[I]n Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past. And since this constraint exists only for photography, we must consider it, by reduction, as the very essence, the noeme of Photography" (Barthes 1981, 76-77). Therefore, photographs are often used as evidence that something existed or happened, for example in the courtroom.

However, according to Barthes this photographic truth is a myth, since truth is always the result of cultural ideologies (Barthes 1981). He argues that there is no singular truth that is not influenced by its context. In a more concrete way, this means that photographs are not objective reflections of reality, but rather the result of human cultural choices. The production of the technology, the framing of the image, the adjustment of the colors: they are all the product of subjective decisions. The photographer decides what he wants to include in a picture, what he wants to leave out and from which perspective the photo should be shot. The designers of the camera made a lot of choices as well and thereby they determine the options that a photographer has (Barthes 1981; Sturken and Cartwright 2009).

The case study that is discussed in this article can function as a critique on the 'machine objectivity' and the concept of the photographic truth. The inability of early color photography to depict the details of people with dark skin is the result of cultural and economic choices. The design of photo cameras was directed to light-skinned consumers and therefore the technological aspects of the cameras were discriminatory against people with dark skin. The photos that were produced with these cameras did not show a truthful representation of reality, since it depicted black people as if their face and body did not have any details. The 'Kodak Shirley' cards reflect the normativity of white skin and thereby show the subjective aspect of the technology of photography, or in other words, how the materiality of technology was influenced by certain

cultural ideologies. It took some time before this racist aspect of color photography became contested by people with dark skin. Roth argues that this is probably the result of the conviction that science and technology are objective; people simply did not think that it could be changed (Roth 2009). When the expansion of the color range finally took place, it was the result of an economic decision. Two big clients of Kodak, the furniture and chocolate industries, complained that they could not use detailed pictures of their products in advertisements. This led to an improvement of the reproduction of dark colors and thereby enabled photographers to capture details on people with a dark skin (Roth 2009). This shows clearly that:

[...] technologies interact with people and the forces of politics, economics, and other aspects of culture in various social and historical contexts, resulting in changes not only in the technologies themselves but also in social practices and uses. In other words, it can be argued that technologies have some agency – that is, they have important and influential effects on society but that they are also themselves the product of their particular societies and times and the ideologies that exist within them and within which they are used (Sturken and Cartwright 2009, 184).

This follows as well from the use of photographs to control and classify the black population of South Africa. The technology of the Polaroid ID-2 camera influenced society by enabling the apartheid government to photograph black South Africans in more detail than other cameras. At the same time, the camera is the product of its society and the time in which it was made. The dominant ideas and power relations of that time, or in other words the ‘discourse’, are thus reflected in its material qualities. In this way it can be understood that the color photography of the 1950s was influenced by, and reinstated, racist ideas.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was to investigate to what extent photography can be considered racist in relation to the color photography of the 1950s. While the Polaroid ID-2 camera and the Kodak Shirley cards were used extensively, the research on the political implications of these technologies is limited. By combining both cases in my analysis and placing them within a broader context of racism, I aim to contribute both to literature on the cases as well as on a broader debate on the objectivity of technology.

First, I discussed the material qualities of the early color photography, thereby showing its inability to represent details of people with a dark skin. I showed how this technical lack was caused by a bias towards light-skinned people and by the ‘normativity of whiteness’, which is illustrated by the ‘Kodak Shirley’ cards on which the colors of photographs were adjusted. Secondly, I gave an analysis of the use of the Polaroid ID-2 camera by the apartheid regime in

South-Africa. I showed that the production of the 'Pass Book' can be understood in a context of biopower and regulation by the state. At the moment that a black citizen was captured by the ID-2 camera this regulation became possible. The Polaroid ID-2 camera was thus a means for the South African government to maintain a system of racism. Furthermore, I argued that the case can be understood from a larger context of classifications in which, throughout history, photography has been used as a tool to create and maintain racist ideologies. Finally, I explained how photography has always been connected to notions of truth and objectivity. The central case study that I discussed in this article shows that the aura of the objectivity of technology can be questioned. Photography as a medium is influenced by the discourse of society and is at the same time able to influence this discourse itself. The technology of photography is thus influenced by culture. This makes it possible to understand how photography can be considered racist.

The research question can now be answered. Photography can be considered racist in the context of the color photography of the 1950s, since its technology was designed on the basis of a normativity of whiteness and since it disadvantages people with a dark skin. The materiality of the technology was thus influenced by a racialized bias. Furthermore, the technology was used to maintain a system of racial segregation. Photography is thus not fully objective and free of cultural influence; it can be produced by and reinstate racist ideas.

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