
Seeing the 'Homeless City'? Some Critical Remarks on the Visual Production of Homelessness through Photography

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› **Abstract_** *While working with visual methodology in the 'field' of urban homelessness, it did not go unnoticed that homeless people seem to be a standard motif in urban photography. Many professional but also amateur photographers (including urban researchers) might have 'documented' or 'captured' homeless lives, faces or stories at least once in their photographic career. Whilst the reasons and intentions for doing so might vary considerably, the results remain similar (worldwide): in most cases homeless people are being presented and constructed as the 'Urban Other'. Thus, those pictures help with the production of dominant knowledge by creating images about homeless people and about their lives in the city from an outside position in a determining way. But pictures produced and distributed by institutions, NGOs or charity organizations also work with this kind of visual representation of homelessness. This paper discusses and questions the possibilities and limits of 'making homelessness visible' in the contexts of urban politics, campaign fundraising and public relations. How can NGOs, institutions and others use visualizations to work with and for homeless people without contributing to the construction of stereotypical visions of homelessness and homeless people? Drawing on experiences from the urban context of the city of Hamburg, Germany, the paper gives insights into visual representations produced by homeless people creating spaces of negotiation through exhibitions. Here, marginalized perspectives challenge how the housed public sees things.*

› **Keywords_** *urban photography, Urban Other, visual representation of homelessness*

Introduction

Urban homelessness is a topic that is accompanied by strong visual attention. There are innumerable photo galleries, video reportages, snap shots, exhibitions, documentaries, movies and artistic practices circulating in public that use visualizations of homelessness in different ways. A critical reflection of these visual products raises questions about what is being represented, how and why it is being represented and what effects these representations have with regard to the impact on public opinion and urban societal relations?

This paper addresses the relationship between visual representations and dominant knowledge production about homelessness and homeless people, and draws on experiences of visual fieldwork from Hamburg, Germany. Based on the assertion that homelessness is the most visible form of poverty in the urban space, here, processes of sight and vision as well as their implications in urban space are discussed from a more theoretical point of view. When it comes to picturing urban poverty there are iconographic traditions as well as established photographic practices that continue to be active and effective today. The paper argues that photographic representations of homelessness in most cases work strongly to produce a 'visual regime' of homeless people and homelessness that is created through devaluation and stereotyping by means of photographic composition, production and technique. This visual regime is powerful and stable and widely taken for granted. By deconstructing the functioning of this visual regime, the aim is to contribute to an understanding of the power of these visual representations and their consequences for the subjects governed by them. On the basis of recently published portraits of homeless people living in Berlin, the paper gives some insights into deconstructing this kind of visual production, their effects and their contexts. As such, published material (e.g., photo books and websites of the project), media announcements and coverage, documentaries, and interviews with the producers of the project have been analysed and interpreted. Some of the project's findings are outlined here, within the limits of this paper. In doing so, this paper aims to sensitize the 'limits' of photography and representational works and to rethink visualization practices in private (e.g., snapshots) but also in public (e.g., NGO, institutional) contexts. However, photography also provides the potential to create spaces in which dominant ways of seeing can be challenged. As one example from the ethnographic visual fieldwork shows, images can contribute to the initiation of reflexive processes among those that view them, and homeless people can tackle power relations through photographic production. These insights draw on results obtained through collaboration with homeless individuals by applying critical visual methodology in a research project in Hamburg. Here, homeless people took over the role of the photographer by visualizing and sharing their perspectives about their city through photography.

Seeing and Picturing Homelessness

Visibility is a strong theme in urban (geographic) research due to the growing importance of urban aesthetics framed by neoliberal logic. Visibility of homeless people in the city is therefore mostly discussed in the context of removal and expulsion from inner city areas as part of processes of gentrification and cleansing (e.g., Mitchell, 2011; Speer, 2014). You can also find discussions on the (in)visibility of homeless people in other contexts, such as in disciplines like social work and sociology, but such discussions are found most of all in institutional publications (e.g., the FEANTSA ETHOS typology). The created categories of visible and invisible (hidden) homelessness are used throughout academic and practice-oriented publications to differentiate between different forms of homelessness. Visible homelessness is associated with practices of sleeping rough by male individuals. Invisible homelessness, however, is associated with being female and adolescent, relying on social networks and sleeping in shelters or elsewhere (Cloke *et al.*, 2007). In 2012, 24,000 people belonged to the group of so-called rough sleeping (and therefore visible) homeless people in Germany (BAGW, 2012). Following this logic, the rest of the homeless population, that is 91.6 percent, is understood as being invisible – at least in urban (public) spaces. Even though in theory and practice these forms of differentiation have proven more and more untenable, the visual regime of visibility and homelessness, and how these are imagined, continues to lag behind current developments in the scholarly understanding of homelessness.

In general, then, those interested in visually representing homeless people still focus strongly on the first category of ‘visible homelessness’. As a result, the homeless body as a photographic motif is overwhelmingly represented as a single, male person on the street. By repeating this motif over and over again, urban homelessness is depicted as a single, male phenomenon, which reproduces and stabilizes the dominant visual regime. Capturing visible homelessness is an easy task for both professional and amateur photographers and the most common reason for photographing homeless people is the intention to somehow make homelessness visible. According to the visual regime, very often a single, male homeless subject with some kind of deficiency is presented, very often in combination with a political or social statement (e.g., the ‘Who cares?’ campaign, Salvation Army, 2013). Ironically, these representations try to render the so-called visible homeless person visible, claiming that he/she had been invisible before.

This leads to the question of what is visible anyway. Seeing and perceiving have been processes in academic discussion for centuries. This paper adopts the understanding of the German philosopher Eva Schürmann, who conceptualizes processes of seeing as a performative practice. She argues that visibility is a process that is based on seeing and being seen (Schürmann, 2008). “Social visibility

is based on a physical visibility in the gaze of the Other” (Schürmann, 2008, p.86). These visual ‘seeing-relations’ (between bodies) are situated within ‘seeing-conventions’, according to current dominant norms and discourses. Hence, what is seeable can be understood as pre-structured, depending on societal contexts. Visible homelessness is therefore the result of processes of seeing and being seen under the conditions of prevailing seeing-conventions. Precisely in that point, visual representations develop a fundamental quality in transporting, supporting and stabilizing dominant knowledge production on a visual basis. Through the production and reproduction of images, symbols and signs they contribute to linking dominant knowledge through visual markers that structure our perception. In the case of so-called visible homelessness we are familiar with visual markers such as cardboard homes, tents in parks, the use of plastic bags, worn-out clothes, people sitting on the ground, etc. (depending on the context and our own perceptions). But these visual markers do not stand alone. They come with certain values – mostly negative ones, like criminal, useless, lazy, social outcast – that are ascribed to the category of homeless, even if those characteristics are not physically visible. The construction of an image of visible homelessness is then strongly linked to stereotypical processes.

A representative study about group-specific misanthropy in Germany shows explicitly how the processes of seeing and devaluation, as well as their spatial consequences, are performatively intertwined in urban space. Asking people their opinions about homeless people, one third agreed with statements that ascribed qualities such as being unpleasant and work-shy to homeless people (Heitmeyer, 2010). Demands for the physical removal of begging homeless people from pedestrian areas are made based on these non-visible attributions (Zick *et al.*, 2010). This causal dependency demonstrates how visibility is intertwined with invisibility and how dominant knowledge production is attached to processes of seeing. Seeing and knowing are being performed, and they actively include the negation of seeing somebody or something. For example, ignoring somebody is a decision not to see somebody; even if this person remains out of sight, the person is still there and cannot be defined as invisible. Making somebody invisible through intentionally avoiding a visual relationship then can be understood as performing a powerful way of seeing.

The definition of invisible homelessness is therefore only based on the opposite of being visible in the sense of being identifiable as a homeless person in public because of not meeting certain stereotyped characteristics ascribed to the imagined homeless body.

This kind of juxtaposition is the basis for processes of ‘Othering’ (Spivak, 1999). The term ‘Othering’ describes processes of making binary distinctions (such as developed/underdeveloped, male/female, etc.) that create homogeneity within contrasted categories. This homogeneity is based on reducing each category to certain characteristics attached to normative attributions that lead to stereotypes (for example: male/female = strong/weak). The function of the characteristics ascribed to the categories is to create differences between the self and the other. The mechanism of Othering defines the self as superior to the Other. Processes of Othering are therefore strongly normative and classify the opposed category or group as inferior (housed/homeless = normal/other = having/needing = healthy/sick etc.) (Glokal e.V., 2012; Thomas-Olalde and Velho, 2011).

Visual Regimes of Homelessness

When homelessness and homeless people are being represented as part of media campaigns, photo books, blogs or exhibitions, the question that needs to be asked is: what is actually being made visible and by whom? Rather than showing a so-called ‘truth’, the images give insights into the photographer’s way of seeing homeless people and current discourses on homelessness, as his or her way of seeing is embedded in prevailing seeing-conventions. Photography never just pictured poverty but rather worked, and still works, as a discursive element participating in the construction and negotiation of poverty as a social problem (e.g., Mirzoeff, 2009; Parvez, 2011; Lancione, 2014). There are traditional techniques and styles of picturing poverty in different photographic genres, which create visual representations of homeless people and homelessness. These seeing-conventions together with photographic practices establish a visual regime of homelessness that constructs and fosters certain ways of seeing and presenting homeless people – for example, as “monsters, angels and marionettes” (Brüns, 04.04.2011). The term ‘visual regime’ refers here to cultural constructions that determine “what is seen and how it is seen” (Rose, 2001, p.6).

Genres such as portrait photography, street photography and social documentary photography are the most common forms used to portray homeless people. Portrait photography as it is practiced today is based on the assumption that focusing on the body/face provides authentic insights into the ‘real character’ of a person. Portraying the homeless body/face is therefore to look for biographies from the streets, assuming that they can be read from the ‘real faces’ of the person portrayed. At the same time, black and white filters, close ups and strong contrasts (and other techniques) are very often used for aestheticisation. Photography thereby beautifies and creates the idea of the “beauty of the poor” (Sontag, 2005 [1973], p.79). The homeless body thus becomes an illustrative motif. Additionally, these portraits

are in some cases accompanied by brief quotes about the reason for homelessness, which give a mere fraction of the full biography of that person. In doing so, portrait photography contributes to the imagined embodiment of homelessness, individualizing the social and structural situation of homelessness.

With social documentaries and street photography the focus is more on aspects of homelessness and homeless life in a societal context. Social documentary – that emerged in the late nineteenth century as a social-critical genre of photography – dedicates itself exclusively to revealing social grievances and societal inequalities such as homelessness. Scenes often depict the so-called everyday life of homeless people. Practices like sleeping or begging in public, the conditions of living in shelters etc., are common motifs in visually representing homelessness. Sontag (2005 [1973]) criticizes this use of photography as effecting visual class tourism. In order to satisfy the interests of social voyeurism, people who do not have the power to defend themselves are often pictured and presented as victims and symbols of social misery (Sontag, 2005 [1973]). In this way, social documentary contributes to constructing an Other reality of homeless people's lives that is in opposition to the imagined 'real' and 'regular' lives of the housed public.

One analysis of current iconographic traditions in social documentary photography draws attention to the continued use of certain compositional elements in representing homelessness. Korff (1997) shows that the gestures of begging and cowering on the ground, as well as submissive positions in being helped, have dominated visual representations of the homeless/poor since the sixteenth century. These ongoing, repeated visual representations of homelessness indicate a very stable visual regime, which depicts the homeless subject as an urban Other, dissociated from 'regular' societal dynamics and behaviour. Street photography plays even more on the simultaneity of opposing 'worlds of poverty and wealth' in the urban space. Striking contrasts and surreal situations in everyday urban spaces highlight inequalities in urban societies and position the homeless subject at the bottom of the social hierarchy. At the same time, street photography is also well known for its snapshot character and the romanticisation of 'urban outcasts' that become part or a symbol of the urban lifestyle. As pictures are shared increasingly in online blogs and galleries or on Instagram, homeless people have become a classic target for street photographers trying to capture urban realities in a mixture of random, raw urban everydayness and artsy beautification (Rose, 2001; 2008).

Together these photographic genres establish a visual regime that dominates visual representations of homeless people and homelessness, as nearly every visual representation uses one form or the other of that photographic repertoire. The dominance of this visual regime, then, applies not only within the particular, internal logic of the relevant genre but is also inherent in the broader mechanisms, practices

and uses of photography, which usually are discussed less than the content of the image. For a critical understanding of the visual representation of homeless people and homelessness, underlying categories such as the photographic event itself, its intention and circulation as well as questions of power relations and ownership need to be considered.

According to Azoulay, photographs are not only final products of a photographic act, they are part of what she calls an event of photography. This event “is made up of an infinite series of encounters” (2012, p.26), and includes the conditions under which an image is produced, the situation and detail of the image itself, its encounters with participants in the image and its viewers. The event of photography cannot therefore be understood as a self-contained process; it is, rather, an ongoing temporary condition based on the circulation and use of the image, the variable spectatorship and the contexts that ascribe new (certain) meanings to it. Processes of seeing, knowing, imagining, determining and deciding are, then, part of the production but also of the reception of photography.

Nevertheless, there is a need to question power relations within this event of photography. Especially where, as in the case of homelessness, there is a strong bias among the group of individuals, the photographer and the intended audience. Usually the photographer holds the key part in this relationship, deciding on who or what is being presented and in what way. These decisions are strongly related to the photographer’s intention or assignment, as well as to his or her way of seeing and photographic style. As for the portrait, the photographer probably gives instructions on where to look, how to look, where and how to sit, etc., and thereby dominates the scene. A street photographer is more likely to pass a scene and record it from his current perspective without asking permission or without being noticed. Either way, both photographers impose their view and their will on the photographed subjects or objects.

These kinds of practices raise concerns as to ownership and ethical questions; Susan Sontag refers to photography as a predatory practice (Sontag, 2005 [1973]). This includes not only taking pictures of a subject without consent but also violation of personal rights when pictures get published, exhibited or become award-winning works of art without considering the identity and participation of the photographed subject. Even where a subject agrees to participate in the event of photography and explicitly gives permission to publish any resulting photographs, the basis of negotiation may be unequal (due to authority, lack of choice, exercise of power...) and the subject will not be able to withdraw consent once the image is circulated.

Furthermore, photographing homeless people or homelessness is never ‘innocent’. There are always ideas and intentions embedded in the event of photography that have a strong impact on the construction of the image itself. What are the pictures

for? Are they used in political or institutional contexts, circulated through galleries or sold to press agencies? Who is the target audience? What is the intended effect of the image – generating empathy, raising money, getting attention? These questions can constitute a serious dilemma for people or institutions working for homeless people, such as NGOs that have a critical attitude about how homeless people are represented but find themselves caught in the visual regime of homelessness when working with visualization. There is a good chance that they will fall back into reproducing common visual representations and power relations where practical constraints, such as the need for fundraising, can only be met by appealing to the public through stereotyped images of the accepted visual regime. In the visual regime of homelessness, there is a strong and stable bias that structures the relationship between the homeless subject, the photographer and the audience – a bias that is difficult to overcome. The argument here is that the established dominant visual regime is always an accomplice in constructing homeless people as the urban Other.

The Making of the Homeless Subject as the Urban Other

This paper retraces the functioning of the visual regime of homelessness by examining in detail one photo project (out of many) performed and implemented by a local newspaper in Berlin, which recently attracted a lot of attention. The brief analysis of the photo project and its exhibition concept provides insights into how its context, seeing-conventions and photographic logics shape the imagining of and produce knowledge about urban homelessness in the public (Website Photo Project Invisible, 2014).

The context

At the beginning of 2014, the local newspaper, Berliner Morgenpost, sent out a photographer and a journalist to the Bahnhofsmission (Railway Mission) at Berlin Zoo station to start some kind of photo project. In the end, the project generated diverse visual products about homelessness and homeless people by creating a website with videos, a photo book, reportage and an exhibition on homelessness. The leading questions of the project were: “Who are those people we often pass by on the street without looking at?” and “What is it like to be homeless?” Instead of taking “typical pictures of misery” the aim was to portray people who are otherwise not noticed by anybody – the invisible, meaning homeless people (Erdmann, 2014, p.7; Website Photo Project Invisible, 2014). The project was funded by the German railway foundation and the ‘Berliner Helfen’ (Berlin Helps) Association (linked to the Berlin Morgenpost newspaper). It is hoped that the photo book, *Invisible: Life on the Streets. Portraits of Homeless People* (Keseling and Klar, 2014), and the website of the project

(Website Photo Project Invisible, 2014) will generate a financial return that will be donated to the Railway Mission Germany Association. Thus, a media enterprise, a public-private railway company and a religious organization are involved in a project aimed at 'making homeless people visible' to a broad urban public via exhibitions in railway stations throughout Germany. Correspondingly, the project was called: 'Invisible'. Portrait photography and portrait filming were chosen as the most suitable means of making the invisible visible.

The images



Figure 1. Margarete, 59, living on the streets for several years

Source: Bahnhofsmanagement Berlin, 2014; Image: R. Klar, 2014

The composition of the pictures is that of classic portrait photography performed in a photo studio. Yet, the project's website tells us that a photo studio was improvised in the cellar of the railway mission; the background canvas is made from some kind of crumpled sheet and the seat is covered by an old patterned blanket. These elements already suggest a poor environment rather than the usually clean and neutral surroundings used for portraits. The setting already works as a symbolic frame and visual marker of the topic of homelessness.

In the photo book, there are both black and white and coloured portraits, with colours and digital technology used for facial close-ups, and black and white analogue technique for the seated portrait scenes. The black and white portraits are discussed here in further detail, with a focus on the images that were displayed in the exhibition. For the black and white portraits, the photographer decided to use expensive (outdated) Polaroid footage. In an interview, he points out that

because of this technique only one shot per person was possible, but that this wasn't a problem because of the "incredible expressiveness of their faces" (compared to photo shoots with celebrities) (Klar, 17.11.2014). The majority of the persons portrayed look directly into the camera. Some also focus upwards and only a very few downwards. As such, the lighting puts a spotlight on the face and upper body of the portrayed person while the surroundings fade into the darkness. The spotlight on the face follows the intention of the photographer to "let the faces speak" as "you can see lifelines, sadness, the whole life in it" (Klar, 17.11.2014). Nevertheless, short statements also accompany each image, giving details about who the portrayed person is and his or her situation. These statements, indeed, represent a variety of perspectives and standpoints on the situation of homelessness and many share a differentiated perspective. Yet, in a radio interview the journalist in question stressed the terrible nature of all the stories she had heard, thereby creating a homogenized narrative of homeless lives as being pitiful (Keseling, 17.11.2014).

The exhibitions

For exhibition purposes, 25 images were transferred onto boards that were to be set up in public. The boards were structured into three parts. The title of the project 'Invisible: Life on the streets: Portraits of homeless people' was used as a header above the image and the image itself occupied the central part of the board. The subject's name, age and a statement were put below the image as a caption. Since November 2014, the boards have been traveling as an exhibition around German railway stations. The observations made in this article refer to the particular exhibition at Hamburg Dammtor station in February 2015.

Circulation

The theme 'invisibility' was immediately picked up by the media when the exhibition was announced to the public; for example, it appeared prominently on the website of German railways, in TV news reports (e.g., Arte TV, ARD Tagesschau, Hamburger Abendblatt) and in podcasts (e.g., Radio Paradiso). Local and international media interpreted invisibility in different ways. On the one hand, some reporting highlights the effort and engagement of the photographer, R. Klar, in "making the invisible visible" and "bringing them into light" (Arte TV, 24.12.2014), suggesting that homeless people usually live in the shadows. Other media outlets concentrated more on the differentiation of 'them' and 'us', for example by stating: "the invisible among ourselves" (Stern, 24.11.2014). The discourse on (in)visibility is thus being reproduced, either by ascribing magic powers to the hands and techniques of a photographer or by identifying Others (the invisible homeless) in contrast to regular urban society (the housed public). Across the whole media coverage the exhibition was applauded as "magnificent" and "impressive" (Hamburger Abendblatt,

16.02.2015; Stern, 24.11.2014). This also manifests in the strong interest in interviewing the producers, R. Klar and U. Keseling, about the exhibitions and the project itself in print, audio and TV reports.

The exhibition itself at Hamburg Dammtor station raised a new aspect of (in)visibility. The promising announcements and positive reports on national TV and local press created expectations among potential audiences. But viewers arriving at Hamburg Dammtor station were to find out that the exhibition making the *invisible visible* had itself been made *invisible*, probably by one of its own sponsors; whereas in Berlin there had been a big opening day of the exhibition at the Bahnhof Zoo station, where the exhibition had been prominently placed, in Hamburg the boards were forced into two unfavourable corners in the entrance areas of Dammtor station and placed between the automatic glass doors, where most of them were barely visible due to the mirror effects.

Additionally, the exhibition was reduced to six image boards and six text boards, with the text boards in the most visible positions. These gave broad information about the project and about railway missions in Germany, but most information was about the German railway foundation – the ‘Berlin Helps’ Association, the photographer and the author.



Figures 2 and 3. Exhibition at Hamburg Dammtor station, February 2015

Images: K. Schmidt

At this point, in critically rereading this project, the question arises of what has actually been made visible? In analysing the images and how they are produced, as well as received, the tendency towards ambivalence in the project becomes clear. Most contradictory appears to be the project’s intention of doing something good for homeless people by making them visible while at the same time contributing to the reproduction of the stigmatizing dominant visual regime of homelessness.

The stability of underlying seeing-conventions and seeing-expectations become perceivable, for instance, through the decision of the photographer to use Polaroid material that creates an old, used, shabby, retro effect, which frames the portraits. Without any doubt this brings an aesthetical quality with it, but it also serves as a visual marker, which suggests that the attributions ascribed to homelessness are something dirty or filthy. Within this frame, the fascination of the homeless face is highlighted not only visually but also verbally by the photographer when he explains that: “the face tells all we need to know” (Klar, 17.11.2014). As in many other portrait series of homeless people (e.g., Serrano, 1990; Jeffries, 2011; Banning, 2013), this has the effect of silencing the voices of homeless people; only the pictured face is interesting as a kind of projection surface for the imagination and this is therefore used for external determination (this silencing theory is strongly supported by the associated video project that can be seen on the website, where each person’s face is filmed and the instructions seem to have been to look into the camera without saying a word). Altogether, the photo project captures more than 50 portraits of 50 different persons of different ages, genders and backgrounds, and by doing so tries to avoid creating a ‘single story’ (Adichie, 2009) of homelessness. Yet, reducing homelessness to individual faces and stories, detached from socio-political and economic structures, helps to construct the urban Other as individual deviations from societal norms – like the housed public.

When statements made by those pictured are used in combination with their images, like in the ‘Invisible’ project, it leaves room on the one hand for self-representation, which shows that homelessness is a diverse phenomenon, instead of representing it as a homogenous category. On the other hand, however, there is a fine line between this and the portrayal of homelessness as a self-made problem that has nothing to do with labour-, gender-, social- or other relations.

The power relations negotiated as part of the photo project cannot be traced in detail. It remains unknown, for example, to what extent the decision to take part, or not take part, in the project was influenced by the fact that the photo shooting took place in an institution of care, which is itself structured by manifold power relations, including between those frequenting the mission and those between staff and guests. It also remains unclear whether those who were photographed chose their pose themselves, or what strategies they used for giving statements about their lives. Nevertheless, the distribution of roles between the photographer, journalist and those photographed and interviewed within the photographic event is based on this powerful relation. In fact, there is an existing bias in that relationship. The role of those who are represented in public and the role of those who decide how they are represented are differentiated into passive and active roles, respectively, and this structure remains in place beyond the exhibition. As a consequence of the photo project, the photographer and the journalist are invited onto radio shows and are portrayed in TV reports, thereby gaining the space to talk about their experi-

ences with homeless people and to speak on their behalf. Those who were photographed, however, are left behind in 'their place' in the 'shadows', waiting to be looked at as images in the exhibitions, on the website or in photo books and potentially to be helped through donations to the railway mission or associations.

According to the institutional and discursive powers of the sponsors, the 'Invisible' project garnered much attention and visibility in the media due to the national campaign of the German railways foundation and respective local press at the exhibition locations. Their way of visually representing homeless people impacted on the public. The success of the project nonetheless lies in the power of the image. As images, homeless faces, bodies and stories gained access to spaces that are usually, through vigorous efforts, kept homeless-free – like train stations. Visibility here is created through objectification, by rendering homeless people as physical, aesthetic works of art and making them 'watchable' as objects but not as persons. In the end, it is the images of homeless people and not the homeless people themselves that were made visible through the photo project. In the case of Hamburg Dammtor station, the importance of the topic was devaluated by how the images were exhibited. Ironically, the dimension of spatial marginality has thereby been added to the already existing marginality in urban societal relations.

Deconstruction through Visual Production

Instead of being an accomplice to the dominant visual regime of homelessness, there is also the chance that the event of photography contributes to a questioning of this regime by supporting deconstructive and emancipatory practices. Of course, this does not mean that it is an easy task. Power relations are always at work in the event of photography. However, the objective can be to actively question these relations and work with or against them by, for example, making them transparent. There are many ways to work with photography and visual production in urban research, social work and other areas in a constructive way. Mixing scientific and activist practices, critical visual methodologies, for example, provide approaches for critical and collaborative analysis and engagement with and through visual production (e.g., Knowles, 2006; Hunt, 2014). In the context of the author's PhD project, which investigates geographies of homelessness, a particular kind of critical visual methodology was applied (e.g., Rose, 2001; Pink, 2010). Focusing on the perspectives of homeless people about the city they are living in, the author collaborated with people in street situation in the city of Hamburg (Germany).¹

¹ The city of Hamburg is only one case study in the research project. The second case study, where the same methodology was applied, with also six people in street situation picturing their city, is Rio de Janeiro (Brazil).

Tackling power relations within photo projects?

In a photo project developed by the author, six people in street situation collaborated by performing 'reflexive photography' (e.g., Dirksmeier, 2013). Using this approach, every person documented his or her perspective on the city using a disposable camera distributed by the researcher, as the task was to picture 'my Hamburg'. People in street situation were therefore active participants in the photo project, determining the content and the context of the images as well as defining the topics, the places and the stories themselves. In so-called 'photo interviews', conversations were conducted about the photos taken by the participants of the project, discussing the intentions, references and significance of the images produced. Two favourite images chosen by each participant became part of an exhibition in a day centre for homeless people in Hamburg. The exhibition created a space for and of negotiation and revealed the reactions of a homeless and housed public audience. One example gives a brief insight into how images can resist dominant visual regimes of homelessness from a social geographic point of view.

Contesting seeing-conventions



Figure 4. "Everybody takes pictures there. Men, women – they position themselves in front of it. I took one without any people in front of it." ('D'², 30.05.2012, Hamburg)

² The names of the photographers have been anonymized here. This decision of the author serves as another example of power relations in photo projects carried out in collaboration with homeless people. Even though wanting to give credits to the photographer by using his or her full name in the caption, there is doubt about doing so. The tension between gaining recognition for an achievement and being exposed to the public is complex and brings up questions of ownership and power (e.g., the power to publish, personal rights of the photographer, etc.).

This image reveals different aspects of contesting dominant seeing-conventions. The image of 'D' in Figure 4 shows a sign attached to a building, which indicates that this building is a police department called Davidwache at Hamburg St. Pauli. Looking at this image, knowing that a homeless person took it, led some viewers (including the author) to rush to quick conclusions about the potential story behind the image as well as about the photographer. These conclusions entailed clear attributions of criminality, which can be directly linked to discourses that construct homeless people as criminal subjects. Yet the reading of the statement the photographer gave leads us in a completely different direction; carrying out an action that is common at that location due to a touristic interest in the building, he is doing something that everybody else does. The contradiction between the stereotypical imagination and the actual intention behind the content reveals the underlying prejudices of the viewers. The potentially surprising effect of the unexpected interpretation of the photographer dismantles the imagination as such and thus causes irritation and at the same time creates space for new processes of negotiating meaning. In this case, the process of deconstruction reveals that we might learn more about prejudgment mechanisms inherent in dominant seeing-conventions and the viewer's imagination than about homelessness itself. By decentering one's own perspective through critical reflection, the Othering process becomes explicit, showing that it is the Self making somebody the Other, and not the Other actually being the Other.

Creating space

The previously shown picture (Figure 4) resists common practices of seeing and reading. It reveals more about homelessness discourse and imaginings, and about viewers making homeless persons the urban Other than it fulfils expectations about homeless bodies and faces. The implementation of critical visual methodology in the form of reflexive photography in this case created the space for people in street situation to appropriate places visually and gain temporary sovereignty over the interpretation of these places. The exhibition additionally made these perspectives accessible to the broader public, and it challenges contemporaneous seeing-conventions by irritating or unsettling the otherwise unquestioned dominant imagination and knowledge (Schmidt and Singer, forthcoming).

Conclusion

Visual representations of homeless people and homelessness are never innocent; they are always products entangled in power relations, intentions, assignments, imaginations and discourses. The currently widely accepted visual regime of homelessness establishes a social order that clearly fixes homeless subjects in the position of the urban Other in contrast to the housed public. This order is maintained by (re)producing and distributing the same images and perspectives with the same attached meanings and attributions over and over again. Rather than staying on the level of abstract critiques, this paper hopes to have contributed to illustrating the potentially problematic nature of visual representations but also to have alternative representations through the implementation of critical visual practices.

However, consciously or unconsciously, we all – as individuals, journalists, institutions or NGOs – take part in some way in the dominant visual regime of homelessness when producing, taking, printing and distributing images of homeless people. Changing the dominant visual regime of homelessness means rethinking societal norms and structures instead of supporting assistance-based approaches. But since it is much easier to begin with changing visual practices, this article concludes with a checklist that is supposed to provide some constructive ideas for questioning visual practices.

Context and production

- What is the intention of visualizing homelessness?
- What is actually in focus?
- Do the photographed subjects know what they are being pictured for and in what context they are being exposed?

Power

- Who is the photographer?
- Can the photographed subjects take part in decisions on what is being photographed and how?

Content of the image

- Is the motif of homeless people being used as a symbol for something else?
- Are the photographed subjects being represented as active, capable subjects?
- Are visual markers that stereotypically indicate poverty and homelessness being avoided?

Beyond picturing homeless people

- How can structural constraints for homelessness be visually represented?
- Why is it necessary to picture homeless bodies and faces? What about structures, institutions and techniques (for example of exclusion (fences, benches...))?

By constantly questioning our visual practices – perhaps by posing these initial questions – there is a chance that we can diversify visual representations of homelessness and people in street situation.

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