Cold War Colour Photography

ARTH 543
Instructor: John O'Brian
Fall 2003

Description

This course investigates colour photography from the late 1940s to the late 1980s. The course could have been called "Between Armageddon and Chromophobia," if the intention were to concentrate on the two most extreme aspects of the material we will look at. The atomic arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union that underwrote the Cold War, and the threat of nuclear winter resulting from the all-out use of nuclear warheads, meant that the era was haunted by the spectre of a mushroom cloud. The Cold War was fought in the shadow of Armageddon. Although Armageddon was (and is) unrepresentable, atomic blasts were repeatedly photographed in both black and white and colour until 1962, when the Limited Test Ban Treaty pushed testing underground. Fear of colour (or chromophobia), on the other hand, is an extreme condition of a different order. Until the 1970s, colour photography was considered unusable by many of those with a stake in photography as a profession. It was thought not to possess ethical gravity, to be serious, and was condemned as facile. The high-chroma characteristics of the medium were suitable only for magazine advertisements, commerce and tourism, and amateur snapshots. They were unacceptable in the production of socially concerned images or contemplative work.

Colour photography became more available as a medium of representation with the introduction of Kodakchrome film in 1935-1936, and widely available only after the end of the Second World War, just as tensions between the West and the Soviet bloc were escalating into the Cold War. During the Cold War, "modernization" was one of the chosen propaganda words favoured by both sides in the conflict. The United States considered capitalist support of its Third World allies and client states to be a contribution to the process of modernization, and the Soviet Union presented communist support of its allies and clients in the same language. By modernization both sides meant the dispersal and use of industrial technologies. But, increasingly, they also meant the dispersal of information and communication technologies, too. For Fredric Jameson, the spread of such electronic technologies and media was a process of "postmodernization."

Neither "modernization" nor "postmodernization" are innocent words. Digital photography, a "postmodernizing" technology, became widespread in 1989 with the introduction into the marketplace of Adobe Photoshop. Photoshop coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the official end of the Cold War - unofficially, the Cold War had been winding down for two decades, as discussed by Stephen E. Ambrose in Rise to Globalism - and with the proclamation of a triumphalist free-market global order. Paradoxically, or maybe not so paradoxically, the proclamation of the new order was often framed in terms of a revived "modernity" of progress and innovation, thus relegating, or attempting to relegate, the discontinuities and uncertainties

posited by postmodernism to a failed past.

I am not suggesting that a direct cause-and-effect relationship existed between colour photography and the Cold War. It did not. But I am suggesting that technological change and social/political change accompany one another, and in particular I am arguing there are interrelationships worth examining between the contours of the Cold War and the uses of colour photography. Writing shortly after the Cuban missile crisis, Marshall McLuhan stated in Understanding Media (1964) that "If the Cold War is being fought by informational technology, that is because all wars have been fought by the latest technology available." If photography is a medium of informational technology - according to McLuhan it was one of the decisive inventions "in making the break between mere mechanical industrialism and the graphic age of electronic man" - how might it have participated in the ideological conflicts of the Cold War? In the seminar, we will read McLuhan, Jameson, Karal Ann Marling (As Seen of TV, 1994), Richard Cavell (McLuhan in Space, 2002) Jonathan Crary (Suspensions of Perception, 2000) and other theorists of media and technology as a way of orienting questions about both commercial colour photography and colour photography as art. We will look at a range of material, some of it on field trips, and maybe one or two films that juxtapose monochrome and colour film stock.

References: Colour photography produced before the 1980s is relatively little examined and rarely theorized in the scholarly literature on photography. The most thorough and insightful analysis of the subject is an unpublished Ph.D. thesis by Sally Stein, The Rhetoric of the Colorful and the Colorless, Yale 1991. It is also the most theoretically astute analysis, informed by Barthes, Foucault, Tagg, Sekula and others engaged in thinking through the conventions and social uses of photography. Stein argues that two historical developments in photography had special relevance for American culture. She provides extensive research on new forms of colour photography that were introduced in the 1930s, while at the same time demonstrating that monochrome photography became the preferred medium for documenting subjects of social concern. Stein looks at the initial resistance to colour, and then at the way it spread across a wide range of commodities in a "colour wave" during the Depression. Stein concludes that as colour became associated with new forms of mass media and new strategies of advertizing, black and white photography became associated with pre-modern traditions of American culture and "thus seemed certain to withstand the intrusions of a commercial modernity." Stein's study thus begs the question: what happened during World War II and after?

Other references and other questions: For what reasons other than those mentioned above did artists wait until the 1970s to use colour photography as a critical medium in its own right? Following his controversial exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1976, William Eggleston was dubbed the "inventor" of colour art-photography because of the way he made the medium central to his practice (John Szarkowski, William Eggelston's Guide, 1976, and Sally Eauclaire, The New Color Photography, 1981). What other artists made it central to their practice at an early date? For example, how should Harry Callahan (Sally Stein, Harry Callahan: Photographs in Color, 1946-1978, 1980) or Stephen Shore (William Jenkins, The New Topographics, 1975) be categorized? Did the Vietnam war play a role in the shift towards colour (Martha Rosler, Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful, c. 1970, Susan Sontag, "Looking at War," 2002, and David D. Perlmutter, Photojournalism and Foreign Policy, 1998)? And how should we reckon with the lethal pleasures of looking at colour images of atomic destruction (Richard Misrach, Bravo 20: The Bombing of the American West, 1990, and Violent Legacies, 1992)?

Still more questions and references: Did the aversion of artists toward colour reflect a general aversion to colour in Western culture at large, as David Batchelor argued recently in his book

Chromaphobia (2000), and why was colour generally thought to lull viewers into a state of pleasure rather than critique? Are we just as likely to find answers to the questions raised by Batchelor by reconsidering the social and technological upheavals of the 1960s and after? For instance, was it only when the idea that photography represented the real, or that photography could effect social change, was thrown into doubt during the 1970s that colour became interesting as an option for artist-photographers? And was it just coincidence that this was also the decade when the market boom for photographs got underway? Should we look for connections between Technicolor film, colour television and colour photography? Does The Wings of Desire, Wim Wenders 1987 film that uses both monochrome and colour for its Cold War setting in Berlin, and his book Once, which also alternates colour and monochrome, merit close examination? Walker Evans declared colour photography to be a "vulgar" medium of "screeching hues and a bebop of electric blues, furious reds and poison greens," and then in 1973-74 at the end of his life, made 2,650 colour Polaroid photographs. How is the shift in Evans's attitude to be understood? And what about the 1980s? Were there changes in technology or social possibility during the decade that might have encouraged the production of large-scale photo-based colour works? Some of this work was produced by means of digital reworking – Thomas Weski describes the results as "artificially expanded images" (How You Look At It, 2000) - but there still remain questions about "postmodernization" and social shifts.