

THE ORIGINS, EVOLUTION AND READAPTATION OF PHOTOGRAPHY STYLES: 1839–2019

Kim Beil: *Good Pictures: A History of Popular Photography*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020, 323 pp.

Kim Beil's "Good Pictures" offers an illuminating overview of the evolution of photography styles across three centuries. The book consists of an introduction, fifty chapters arranged into six sections, acknowledgements, notes, the list of further readings and an index.

Organised in a chronological order, "Good Pictures" traces the history of fifty photographic trends that emerged since the invention of photography in the 19th century. Each chapter focuses on one particular style: its origins, history, meaning and technical aspects. Beil uncovers changing aesthetics through multiple perspectives – photographers, guidebook authors, commentators, journalists, scholars, writers, and photo editors, to name a few. Diversity of viewpoints is also enhanced by the book's visual content. The author illustrates concepts with photographs of iconic, lesser-known, or unknown photographers giving the readers the chance to explore both famous and less popular works.

The research conducted by Beil impresses with its depth and dimensionality. Exploring the past practices from historical perspectives enables the readers not only to understand the relationship between previous and latest trends, but also gain a better insight into the future of visual culture. For many readers learning about the challenges faced by the photographers in the analog era may prove to be an eye-opening experience. Confronting the past limitations with endless digital possibilities generates new ways of looking at current images. "Good Pictures" allows to understand art through continuities, rather than divisions, between different stages of photography life.

Beil not only discusses how instructional literature and available technology impacted the cycle of particular trends, but also discovers correlations between them by offering the mode of reading characteristic for the Internet. Take for instance the chapter on selfies (No. 46). When discussing posing tips for looking attractive, Beil leaves a yellow caption (in square brackets) referring us to Chapter 28 on glamour images. By using a kind of "hyperlink" the author invites the readers to page through the book (and thus different time periods) to discover creative connections between the past and contemporary photographic practices. The interdisciplinary

approach is also achieved by references to other art fields. Chapter 4 discusses how photographers drew on drawings conventions to create portraits in the 19th century. Chapter 30 explores the trend of taking pictures of TV screens. Chapter 47, on the other hand, addresses the use of film aesthetics in fashion and editorial photography. These, of course, are just a few examples.

Beil begins “Good Pictures” with discussing seven trends that emerged between 1839–1860. From the very start Beil points to the complex nature of photographic styles. As mentioned several times in the book, new trends and inventions have brought both new opportunities and challenges to photographers. The early daguerreotype images were praised for their sharpness (Chapter 1), but at the same time, this quality was contrary to the aesthetics desired in portraits (p. 25). The author also touches upon the issue of truth and photography by recalling the criticism of hand painting (see Chapter 3). The main argument against this technique “[...] was that it obscured the photographic nature of the image, sacrificing truth-value for artistic effects” (p. 34). This is a particular intriguing observation in the view of current image manipulation processes. Learning that pictures have been embellished since the 19th century prompts reflection on how deeply editing is rooted in photographic imagery.

The topic of retouching pictures returns throughout the book including its second part which consists of ten chapters covering the period: 1861–1900. In this section Beil continues to explore the development of photography, by discussing further changes in the use of lighting, depth, composition, and hues (among other things). She also discusses how more permanent pictures were created (Chapter 14) and how the invention of new technologies influenced posing and subject matter (see, e.g., Chapter 15). The issue of changing meanings of styles is also addressed (here and later in the book). The elements of carbon printing, for example, although initially considered a disadvantage, they were later used to produce images “[...] more evocative of an artist’s unique sensibility” (p. 89).

The third part of the book presents eight trends that emerged between 1901 and 1929. As photography became more widely available, professional photographers started to use old techniques for artistic purposes (pp. 107–108). In Chapter 20 Beil discusses how pictorialists employed the gum bichromate process to create painting effects on their photographs, while in Chapter 21, the creative uses of soft-focus are analysed. A return to the aesthetics of early photography is also addressed (see Chapter 22) as well as the issue of the privacy of the subject photographed (see Chapter 25). The discussion also includes, among other things, the improvements in landscape, wildlife, and night photography (see Chapters 18, 19 and 23).

The next part of the book discusses the history of eight photographic trends that originated between 1930 and 1965. Beil analyses further examples of styles whose meanings have changed over time. She notes that angled shots were originally considered a signifier of amateur quality (p. 151). Later, however, they “[...] quickly became associated with the energy and unconventional ideals of modernism” (p. 152). Blur, originally thought to be a camera malfunction, then indicated a sense of speed (p. 177). One of the many topics discussed by Beil is also the shift

in the photographer-subject relationship. In Chapter 28 the author notes that glamour images reduced the distance between the camera and the person being photographed (p. 165). This is an interesting point in view of the fact that stars are somewhat distanced from “ordinary” people (even though different strategies are used to make them look more approachable). The photographic closeness applied to enhance the sense of the unattainability is definitely worth further exploration.

The following nine styles are presented in the fifth part of the book that covers the period: 1966–1995. The section starts with a discussion on the use of lens flare in films and photography (Chapter 34). Beil points out the paradoxical nature of the trend: while the effect created by the lens flare signifies authenticity (i.a.), it is also the effect that is obtained digitally (p. 194). This observation brings us back to the question of truth and photography and prompts further reflections on the ability of digital manipulation to convey the sense of realness. Among the many subjects discussed in this section is also the relationship between photography and race. In Chapter 40 Beil notices: “Embracing golden hour also meant that white photographers, critics, and subjects had to expand their understanding of the variable nature of skin tones as represented by color film” (p. 221). By discussing how trends have influenced the representation of people of different races, Beil reveals the often-neglected part of art history, making “Good Pictures” a significant contribution to the discourse on photography as a carrier of social and cultural meanings.

The last sixth part of the book focuses on the eight photographic styles that emerged between 1996 and 2019. Beil, among other things, explores how trends have been impacted by the advent of social media and new technologies. The role of social media features in popularising photographic trends was also highlighted. According to Beil, tagging pictures facilitates identifying and finding styles (p. 244). Liking content, on the other hand, makes trends more visible (p. 244).

“Good Pictures” is an invitation to discover a diverse range of photographic styles from the birth of this medium to the present time. This inspiring guide through the history of photography grants us the opportunity to explore both changes in trends as well as their sociocultural significance. A rich and well-researched discussion accompanied by a vast variety of images will appeal both to professional and amateur photographers as well as everyone who would like to learn more about visual culture. The book contains plenty of other interesting insights which due to the limited scope of the review could not be mentioned here. While I would greatly appreciate a bit of discussion on the closeness/distance issue, I need to admit that reading “Good Pictures” is a fascinating journey through time, and definitely a must-have book for all photography enthusiasts.

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