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**Silke Horstkotte**

## **Photography and the Posthuman in Ulrike Draesner's *Mitgift* and *Vorliebe***

### **Between Language and Images**

*To be human is to have language.* In his preface to the psalms, Martin Luther cites the ability to speak as the decisive criterion that separates man from non-human animals.<sup>1</sup> Medieval anthropology knew of several specific differences between human and non-human animals; besides language, these also included upright walk and the ability to write. Luther, however, insists exclusively on the exceptionality of human language. Following in his wake, and radicalizing Luther's thought, Johann Gottfried Herder concludes 250 years later that 'even as an animal, man has language'.<sup>2</sup> For Herder, humans are linguistic beings through and through. Language is not a higher faculty that separates us from non-human animals because we have reason and they do not; language permeates us so much that even our animal nature includes the use of language. As Arnold Gehlen remarks, Herder's sentence anticipates modern anthropology in its entirety.<sup>3</sup> As a rational and linguistic being, man is part of nature but at the same time we are something different, all the way through our anatomy and physiology. To be human is to be, uniquely, both animal and not-animal.

*To be human is to have images.* Before we speak, images order our world and shape our experience. Painted and graven images constitute some of the oldest archaeological evidence of human cultural activity – predating records of human speech and writing by tens of thousands of years. Set against an exclusive emphasis on man as a linguistic being, an understanding which has dominated philosophical anthropology since Luther's time, art historians and Visual Studies scholars have recently focused on image-making and image-

viewing as crucial activities that make us human. For the art historian Gottfried Boehm, man is first and foremost a *homo pictor*, a maker of images.<sup>4</sup> Hans Belting's *Anthropology of Images* describes the practice of image making as closely interwoven with the archaic cult of the dead and as a fundamental human cultural technique: images come into being as alternative embodiments of the dead and are therefore dependent on a distinct carrier medium. While the image is embodied in this medium, the medium also regulates the bodily experiences of contemporary spectators. For this reason, the history of images forms part of a history of the human body, and refers both to the cultural history of bodily constructs, and the history of sense perception as a physical activity.<sup>5</sup>

The two designations of humans as linguistic beings, on the one hand, and as makers and spectators of images, on the other, make strange contact in Ulrike Draesner's poem 'formation fontanelle' ['fontanelle formation'].<sup>6</sup> The poem reflects a conversation between an I, most likely a woman, and her former lover, most likely a man. Although the two interlocutors are not explicitly gendered, the majority of Draesner's poems speak from a female perspective and articulate female bodily experience and knowledge. More specifically, such a gender distribution seems probable because of the positions that are ascribed to both speakers, positions that concern the two conflicting anthropological theses sketched out above. The poem 'formation fontanelle' consists of a patchwork of quotations from a conversation between the two figures, and reflections made during that conversation, partly by the speaker and partly by the lover. The overall perspective of the poem, however, is a retrospective one, in which the speaker remembers fragments of what her lover said – winter being over, a flight of geese 'in wechselnder, stets / wachsender ... formation' [in shifting, ever / growing ... formation], and wonders whether the two will ever get back

together ('ob wir noch mal / zusammen kommen' [whether we will ever / come together again]).

Interwoven with these unmarked fragments of speech is a second type of utterances which reflect on and develop the lover's remarks into trains of images. Thus, the formation of geese first becomes 'ein halber tulpenkelch' [half a tulip calyx], then 'das späte alphabet' [the late alphabet] – ('ein v ein z ein w', [a 'v' a 'z' a 'w'] – finally trickling into (the speaker's?) fontanelle, 'wo wir aus bildern sind' [where / we are made of images]. The second stanza, while clarifying that the alphabet remark originates with the man – 'sagtest du' [you said] – leaves it open whether that remark was made in reference to the 'härtester Winter' [harshes winter] or to the train of geese. The stanza also further complicates the relation between what is being seen, what is being said, and the metaphoric expressions in the poem that emerge from both, by introducing the enigmatic image of a ray of light that confuses itself, leaps away, and finally becomes a small three-legged black dog 'wie ein kanguruh / wie unruh see und himmelsformation' [like a kangaroo / like unrest sea and sky formation]. The third stanza re-arranges and varies the motifs of birds, flowers, dog and sky once more, again referring to the 'fontanellen wo wir bildern' [fontanelles where we (make) images] before closing the poem with a final one-word 'fort' [away].

The poetic technique of rearranging and varying a limited number of sentences, images and motifs has an ancestor in Clemens Brentano's 'Der Spinnerin Nachtlid' ['The Night Song of the Spinning Girl'].<sup>7</sup> The pious 'Gott wolle uns vereinen' [please God to unite us] of the Brentano here becomes the more mundane question 'ob wir noch mal / zusammen kommen'. Like its famous precursor, 'formation fontanelle' is both a love poem and a poetological poem. But where Brentano's poem draws explicit parallels between spinning and singing, drawing both together in the person of the 'Spinnerin' [spinning girl], Draesner's

poem leaves open where its reflections and metaphoric transformations originate. Do they all come from the poem's speaker, are some of them also contributed by the lover, or are they situated in a sphere beyond the individual figures of speaker and lover? A second difference between pretext and intertext concerns the means by which connections are made and variations are held together. Brentano uses a musical pattern of rhyme, sound, and tone, drawing together the one-line clauses that make up 'Der Spinnerin Nachtlid' through an alternating pattern of 'a'- and 'ei'-rhymes (Jahren / waren, Nachtigall / Schall; weinen / scheinen, allein / rein). Draesner relies on what may be described as a visual equivalent of this sound pattern, as the v of the bird formation finds a counterpart in the image of the tulip calyx or chalice, while the formation inside the fontanelle ('wo wir aus bildern sind') is mirrored in the second stanza's 'himmelsformation' [sky formation], microcosm rhyming (metaphorically speaking) with macrocosm. The lovers themselves become a flock ('schwarm'). Thus, rather than finding rhymes, 'formation fontanelle' uses images to evoke a train of thought and to create coherence; because these are metaphoric images they are nevertheless situated ambivalently between visual imagination and linguistic expression.

At the heart of this chain of metaphorical equivalences sits the idea of a 'fontanellenloch (wo / wir aus bildern sind)' [fontanelle gap (where / we are made of images)], which also lends the poem its title. In this complex image, the two anthropological conceptions of the human as a linguistic and as a pictorial being come together in uneasy tension – a tension which also underlies the plotting and characterization in some of Draesner's prose fiction, especially in the novels *Mitgift* and *Vorliebe*. I see this tension as key to Draesner's ongoing literary engagement with what it means to be human in a post-human age, and with biopolitics more generally. The poem 'formation fontanelle' evokes two different modes of perception, one that sees the world in terms of language and of discreet

signs ('ein v ein z ein w'), while the other turns the same shape into the integral form of the tulip, which then becomes an independent visual metaphor that can drip into (the speaker's?) fontanelle 'where we are made of images'. Thus, the poem implies that our brains – inside our skulls – are the places where what we have visually perceived makes us into what we are: beings who are put together by the images we receive.

This anthropological thesis mirrors a phenomenological concept of the image which emphasizes the activity of the image in the process of being perceived. Since Ulrike Draesner is a widely-read author whose texts are, at least partly, shaped by a poetics of knowledge, it is well worth pursuing the phenomenological line of thinking which underlies the implicit poetics of the image in Draesner's texts, but from which Draesner also diverges in some ways. For Jean-Luc Nancy, the image effectuates an intimate force that moves us; activity in this process is wholly on the side of the image.<sup>8</sup> Bernhard Waldenfels describes every perception as a reciprocal action of 'pathos' (that which comes toward me) and 'response' (my answer to this other).<sup>9</sup> Like Nancy, Waldenfels proceeds from Husserl's theory of the image act, according to which the image is only that which appears or presents itself to me, not its material shape.<sup>10</sup> For a phenomenological theory of the image, the image is 'not an object that we see additionally, as another thing, but a medium of seeing which is itself involved in seeing and of which we become aware as a medium'.<sup>11</sup> The term 'medium', in this context, refers to any kind of in-between, in the broadest sense. Jean-Luc Nancy goes even further when he identifies the image itself with the process of its being seen, a process in which I become entangled in the image even as the material ground of the image disappears.

It is tempting to associate this kind of phenomenological understanding of the image, which Draesner seems to evoke in 'formation fontanelle', with the putatively female perspective of the poem's speaker. After all, the alphabet reading, against which the tulip

image is pitched, seems to be contributed by the male lover. While the alphabet reading implies a disembodied deciphering of signs and a clear distinction between object and subject of perception, the tulip image only becomes realized when it appears to the viewer, who then takes it up into her body, thus negating a subject-object distinction. Both the passivity of this reception and the lack of a clear subject-object distinction appear suggestive of a female gender stereotype. At the same time, however, it is important not to overstate the opposition between an active male deciphering and a passive female absorption of images in ‘formation fontanelle’. It should be noted that the poem’s speaker does not receive the tulip image through her eyes but through the fontanelle, which is ossified in adults. The ‘formation fontanelle’ produced in this process cannot be a simple reception of an outside image, but needs to be understood as a complex formation process in which linguistic and cognitive faculties as well as the poetic imagination take an active part. The halved tulip calyx dripping into the fontanelle, after all, is a metaphor invented by the speaker, and it is only through this metaphor that we reach the place ‘where we are made of images’. The poem itself, then, proves to be a ‘formation fontanelle’, because it is here that images and language are joined together so closely that the alternative between the human as a linguistic and as a pictorial being becomes meaningless. According to this first reading of Draesner’s work, then, humans are both linguistic and pictorial beings, and they realize the potential for both as men and as women.

### **Digital image culture and posthumanism**

Ulrike Draesner develops this phenomenologically-affected anthropology in greater detail in her novels *Mitgift* and *Vorliebe*.<sup>12</sup> She does so from a decisively contemporary standpoint by evoking a situation in which images are omnipresent, but in which their representational

potential has become, nevertheless, extremely problematic. Never before in the history of humankind have as many pictures been produced as today – most of them digital photographs which are staged, edited, and adapted to the fantasy of their photographers to a previously unthinkable extent. In the words of photography critic Fred Ritchin, ‘photography in the digital environment involves the reconfiguration of the image into a mosaic of millions of changeable pixels, not a continuous tone imprint of visible reality. Rather than a quote from appearances, it serves as an initial recording, a preliminary script, which may precede a quick and easy reshuffling.’<sup>13</sup> The photograph, which many critics until recently took to be a mechanical trace and inscription of the real, without an intervening human subjectivity, has become almost indistinguishable from imaging techniques such as 3D-ultrasound images or the pictures produced by the Hubble telescope, which look like photographs but are in fact visualizations of non-visual data or combinations of optical camera images, spectrographies and thermal images.

On the one hand, these technologically produced images realize the fantasy of a non-subjective perspective. On the other, however, they do not picture a reality we could have seen in any other way than through these images – thereby undermining the entire idea of an objective ‘real’. Moreover, these images co-exist, sometimes even overlap with, digital photographs which are extremely subjective (because highly edited according to the subjective preferences of their photographers). These images, too, although they have been adapted to their photographers’ visual preferences, do not express a way of seeing the world that has any basis outside of the images themselves. They are much more radically divorced from a sense of objectivity, and of realism, than analogue photographs, which also show an image of reality that diverges in important ways from the image given to us through our senses. What a photograph – even an analogue one – shows us is not an image of the real but

a model of seeing, based on a culturally specific way of constructing pictures (through monocular central perspective), that in turn shapes our idea of visual sense perception.<sup>14</sup>

Into the abyss opening up between images and things that are not quite images – into this evacuation of the image from itself, Ulrike Draesner's novels introduce the following double question: what happens to the image if it is not an expression of the human body, and radically divorced from sense perception? And what happens to man as a *homo pictor* in the digital visual culture in which these non/images have their place? How – to draw both questions together – does the idea of the human as a pictorial being change if the images with which men and women have to deal do not assure them of their humanity, but represent a post-human view of the world? With these questions, Draesner's novels lead us into current debates about the posthuman, and about a bioaesthetics which reflects the philosophical discourse of biopolitics through artistic means.

As Rosi Braidotti explains, posthuman theory reacts to the double challenge to the concept of the human posed by present-day scientific advances (in, for instance, reproductive medicine, stem cell research, or cosmetic surgery), and by global economic concerns.<sup>15</sup> The resulting posthuman condition introduces a 'qualitative shift in our thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of common reference for our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet'.<sup>16</sup> In the biogenetic age known as the 'anthropocene', the 'historical moment when the Human has become a geological force capable of affecting all life on this planet', Braidotti calls for a 'new ecological posthumanism [that] raises issues of power and entitlement in the age of globalization and calls for self-reflexivity on the part of the subjects who occupy the former humanist centre, but also those who dwell in one of the many scattered centres of power of advanced post-modernity'.<sup>17</sup> Defined within an 'eco-philosophy of multiple belongings', the posthuman subject is 'a relational subject constituted

in and by multiplicity, that is to say a subject that works across differences and is also internally differentiated, but still grounded and accountable', 'embodied and embedded'.<sup>18</sup>

The changing conception of the image, and the accompanying changes to the status of individual images, may appear less threatening to our ideas of the human than the changes associated with a globalizing neoliberalism, or with genetic engineering. But the posthumanity of digital images, too, has its part in the discourse of the anthropocene. In this context, images and imaging practices are beset with fears of de-humanizing representation, but also with utopian hopes for a better posthuman future. Critics like Elizabeth Grosz and Boris Groys, who consider the role of visual art within the radically shifting biopolitics of the anthropocene, argue that art has the potential to overcome the containment of the present by elaborating on futures yet to come. For Grosz, art has an intensely political function because it is a bioaesthetics charged with the creation of new worlds and forms of life.<sup>19</sup> Boris Groys sees life and art as infused with technology in a biopolitical age. Just as images of the real turn into simulacra of imaging technologies, life can be artificially altered or enhanced until natural and artificial life become undistinguishable. Groys compares the tendency of art galleries no longer to show original artwork in favour instead of documenting happenings or installations to the substitution of artificial simulations for real life in cloning, which to him emblemizes the biopolitical age.<sup>20</sup>

Ulrike Draesner is a knowledgeable author, always up to speed on developments in cultural theory. Her novels *Mitgift* and *Vorliebe* constitute carefully constructed interventions in the discussions of which I have sketched out only a few strands. Indeed, a number of early contributors to these debates are named explicitly in *Mitgift*, including such classics as Judith Butler and Michel Foucault. Both novels also engage with new scientific advances that throw into doubt long-held convictions about what it means to be human. Lukas, one of the central

characters of *Mitgift*, is an astrophysicist, as is Harriet, the protagonist in *Vorliebe*. The research programs of these two characters challenge an anthropocentric world view, while the intersexual character Anita subverts the splitting of the human into male and female. Both *Mitgift* and *Vorliebe* can therefore be read as repositories for a poetics of knowledge of the present, a poetics of knowledge that is centrally concerned with biopolitics or maybe anthropopolitics, a policing of the human.

But that poetics of knowledge needs to be understood through the lens of the photographic images through which biopolitical issues are introduced and addressed in both novels. More than anything else, *Mitgift* and *Vorliebe* are important literary contributions to the study of contemporary visual culture. Both engage with visual culture theory to address the contested question of human nature as linguistic or as pictorial, but also as counting, measuring and calculating, and to the simultaneous interweaving and growing problematization of these assignments in the present. In his post-photographic theory, Fred Ritchin argues that ‘at very fundamental levels our media, in the digital environment, will profoundly and permanently change us – our worldview, our concept of soul and art, our sense of possibility’.<sup>21</sup> In *Mitgift*, and to a lesser extent also in *Vorliebe*, Draesner illustrates some of these changes through her carefully crafted plots and characters. However, she goes beyond a mechanistic view, in which the image works on us, by outlining a phenomenological understanding of the image in which image and spectator are not fully separated from each other. In *Mitgift*, photography constitutes a central issue through whose focus all other discourses which Draesner introduces into the novel – such as scientific criticism, biopolitical and gender theory, and the postmodern deconstruction of the subject – are viewed. In *Vorliebe*, photographs are somewhat less conspicuous, but here too the ways of being in the world that are embodied in the four protagonists cannot be detached from their

respective engagement with images. The second half of this chapter concentrates on describing this poetics of the image in *Mitgift* and draws on *Vorliebe* to support that argument.

### ***Mitgift* and Memory Mania**

*Mitgift* tells the story of the two sisters Aloe and Anita. Anita was born with an enlarged clitoris which was adjusted to a heteronormative female anatomy during a long series of invasive operations. Her family, however, have kept stubbornly silent about Anita's intersexuality. Only in her mother's rare outbursts and later also those of her sister Aloe is she called a 'Zwitter' [hermaphrodite]. Yet Anita's deviant sexual identity finds indirect expression through all other characters: the uptight mother begins an affair with her childhood sweetheart, the US soldier Gary; Aloe denies her sexuality by becoming anorexic; her boyfriend Lukas seeks pleasure in a luxury brothel. The novel's title *Mitgift* calls up the complex of familial inheritance, so prevalent in German literature at the time of the novel's publication (2002). But the family secrets in *Mitgift* relate less to the historical inheritance of the Nazi era than to biological heredity and reproduction. In the two sisters Aloe and Anita, Draesner draws the signature of an era in which hygiene has been replaced by stress-management, sex by genetic engineering, and reproduction by replication, as the Oxford postgraduate Patrizia remarks in the novel (*Mitgift*, pp. 26–27). The photographic images in *Mitgift*, too, gain their meaning within this biopolitically charged context.

Compared with other novels which describe or include photographs, the wealth and breadth of photographic discourses and practices evoked in *Mitgift* is remarkable. In 2002, when *Mitgift* came out, the key author whose use of photographs dominated the literary scene

and the study of photography in fiction was W.G. Sebald, whose novel *Austerlitz* had been published the previous year. With *Vertigo*, *The Emigrants* and *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald had already published three previous prose works interspersing printed texts with reproductions of photographs, maps, charts and other images to great acclaim. Monika Maron's *Pawels Briefe* [*Pavel's Letters*] had come out in 1999 and Marcel Beyer's *Spione* [*Spies*] in 2000. In 2003, Stefan Wackwitz's *Ein unsichtbares Land* [*An invisible Country*] would be published alongside a re-edition of Peter Henisch's *Die kleine Figur meines Vaters* [*The small Figure of my Father*]. Alongside these books which include photographic reproductions stands Ulla Hahn's novel *Unscharfe Bilder* [*Blurred Images*, 2003], which describes photographs but does not reproduce them.

The 2000s were the decade of a memory boom, or even 'memory mania' when a large number of generational or new family novels reconsidered German history through the lens of family memories.<sup>22</sup> The photographs in these books – often family snapshots, but also publicly known documentary photographs – explored an ambivalent relation between documentation, imagination, and memory. Often directly or indirectly influenced by theories of photography from Walter Benjamin to Roland Barthes, they exposed photographic objectivity as a myth; Sebald in particular went to great lengths to show how the photograph is always subject to interpretation, if not outright manipulation and distortion, and is also deeply dependent on contextual information external to the image.<sup>23</sup>

This is the context in which Ulrike Draesner's *Mitgift* has to be considered, since these books – especially Sebald's work – have been studied extensively and have been extremely influential in directing critical thinking about photography in fiction.<sup>24</sup> It is a context with which *Mitgift* shares some connections, but in which it also stands out. One of the common concerns highlighted by the use of photographs within the new family novel is

the role of family and the structuring of history through the pattern of generations. *Mitgift* tells the story of the Böhm family, Holger and Ingrid Böhm and their daughters Aloe and Anita. Numerous motifs and structures serve to highlight the theme of inheritance. There is the grandmother Katja with her amber necklace, for example; the motif of the family heirloom and the theme of inheritance is further underscored by the title, *Mitgift* (literally, dowry, but more evocative of giving or passing on than the English term). There is the ambivalent, if not hostile, relationship between Aloe, the protagonist, and her sister Anita, who was born with indeterminate sexual organs but whose intersexuality has been hushed up in the family. There are other family secrets too, especially Ingrid's clandestine relationship with the American soldier Gary, and this secret in particular goes back to the early postwar years, to Germany's Allied occupation, and thus broadly speaking to the Nazi theme which is at the heart of the vast majority of family novels from the early 2000s. This connection to history through family, family secrets, and family heirlooms aligns Draesner's novel with family novels such as Tanja Dücker's *Himmelskörper* [*Celestial Bodies*, 2003].

In *Mitgift*, however, this entire thematic complex remains in the background, forming the backdrop to the unfolding love story between Aloe and her boyfriend Lukas, and to the story of Aloe's complicated relationship with her sister Anita. Both stories are told in retrospect: each of the novel's five chapters is introduced by an episode set in the present where we encounter Aloe raising Anita's son Stefan. On each of these three narrative layers, photographic practices and the consumption of photographs serve to regulate the characters' relationships amongst each other, and to their environment. Different ways of using and of looking at photographic images also connect the three narrative layers with one another. The generational pattern on the third, chronologically most distant layer (Aloe and Anita) situates photographs in relation to the human body. On the second layer, however, that relation is

radically questioned by Aloe's and Lukas' thinking about photography, since both privilege a posthuman photography that cuts ties with the human body. This view is paralleled in *Vorliebe*, where Harriet also engages with the images from the Hubble telescope that fascinate Lukas in *Mitgift*. The third temporal layer of *Mitgift* extends the posthuman discourse of photography, but it also modifies Aloe's attitude towards photography by showing how photographs can express a human subjectivity even in a digital anthropocene.

### **Surface and Distance**

The story of Aloe and Lukas, the most important of the three narrative layers in *Mitgift*, begins with a visit that Aloe pays to Lukas at Oxford. Both met at Oxford as undergraduates; now Aloe has moved back to Germany in order to complete a doctorate in art history, while Lukas stays on at Oxford. As Aloe walks out of the customs area at Heathrow, the first sight that greets her is an advertising hoarding with a fashion spread: 'Werbung für den Sommer: eine junge Frau unter Wasser, oder Werbung für Taucherbrillen, denn was die Frau trug, war gelb und grün und riesengroß' [an advertisement for summer: a young woman under water, or an ad for diving goggles, since the thing the woman wore was yellow and green and huge] (*Mitgift*, p. 14). Everything about this placard reminds Aloe of her intersexual sister Anita, whose hormonal treatments have given her a highly desirable feminine physique, while retaining a more masculine musculature. Anita is the walking image of 1990s fitness culture, and a sought after fashion model. A few pages before the Heathrow episode, the topic of fashion photography was introduced through a recurring daydream of Aloe's in which she sees a woman just like the one on the hoarding – under water, with yellow and green goggles – who smiles lovingly at Aloe. In the dream, Aloe has an intense physical reaction to the

woman's smile: 'und immer pocht Aloes Herz an dieser Stelle so sehr' [and at this point Aloe's heart always beats so hard] (*Mitgift*, p. 10). But when she encounters the hoarding at Heathrow, Aloe rejects the closeness which the photo seems to promise by turning away, refusing to be reminded of Anita. Of course, the connection offered by the poster is a superficial one. The image does not reveal anything about Anita or about their relationship. It is not even a photo of Anita, just reminiscent of the types of photos that Aloe associates with Anita. Moreover, it is not a private family photograph but a public image calling for fast consumption and which is available to everyone. But whether the image really shows Anita herself or not is not the point, as the woman on the poster has stopped being a human subject and become a consumer commodity. The hoarding itself is placed in an environment – the arrivals area at an airport – where the viewer is bombarded with images that are endlessly repeated as he or she stumbles, stiff and dehydrated, out of the sensory deprivation area of the plane. Unlike the family photographs in the novels by Sebald, Maron or Beyer, the advertisement does not point to the past but illustrates a contemporary global media culture in which the same anonymous images circulate everywhere we go.

While Aloe shoots a parting glance at the poster that does not permit the connection she both seeks and avoids, her boyfriend Lukas is interested in a distanced or elevated perspective on the universe, which does not aim at seeing details but at grasping the big picture, and for which digital screens are better suited than photography. Lukas' fascination with a cosmos that cannot be perceived by human means finds a continuation in the mathematician Harriet in *Vorliebe*. In a key scene of the latter novel, a series of satellite images of the galaxy published in the magazine *Geo* are confronted with the reproduction of a Ruysdael painting that Harriet has put up in her kitchen. The Ruysdael is said to remind Harriet of her childhood feeling that the world does not end where it stops (*Vorliebe*, p. 32).

Ruysdael evokes this border metonymically (by implying that the world continues behind the horizon), but the satellite images pretend to actually show what lies behind the perceivable world. In *Vorliebe* this pretence is exposed as a fiction: the *Geo* images do not show the cosmos as it has been recorded by the satellite. The images had to be edited by Harriet to conform to the human idea of the starry sky. The unedited images would not be legible for uninstructed spectators. What the cosmos really looks like, according to recorded data, is unbearable:

Die nicht gesäuberten Computerzeichnungen hatten etwas Schreckliches. Als sehe man, für Sekunden, durch die Maske eines viel größeren, mehrdimensionalen Wesens. Es war mechanisch, überlegen, unendlich kalt.

[Before they were cleaned up, the computer graphs had something terrifying about them. As if one were seeing, for seconds, through the mask of a far larger, multidimensional being. It was mechanical, superior, infinitely cold.]

(*Vorliebe*, p. 48)

A genuinely posthuman vision of things that do not conform to our perception, and that exist outside of any relation with human measure, is unbearable for human spectators. Harriet gets out of this conundrum by using numbers to produce patterns and create connections even if these do not necessarily mean anything.

Besides the satellite images, Lukas, in *Mitgift*, is also associated with a second type of image. When he visited Aloe in her Oxford college room for the first time, Lukas left behind a stack of pornographic postcards showing:

Eine gut trainierte, stark geschminkte Frau, Oberkörper in einem roten Lederbody, schwarze Weichgummistiefel bis übers Knie, Brustwarzen frei, blickte in die Kamera, als ginge es sie nichts an. Sie erledigte ihre Aufgabe, kalt, geschäftstüchtig, mit der Präzision eines Insektes, das einem anderen den Hinterleib in Stücke säbelt.

[a muscular woman wearing a lot of make-up, her upper body trussed in red leather, soft black rubber over-the-knees boots, nipples uncovered, looking into the camera as if that were of no concern to her. She carried out her duty coldly, efficiently, with the precision of an insect slicing another insect's abdomen into pieces'.] (*Mitgift*, p. 36)

With their obviously staged, unemotional depiction, the postcards seem at first to invite a cold, distanced gaze; Aloe takes them to be a present from Lukas, promising her a secure life by his side, a functional relationship based on give or take without emotional involvement ('geben und nehmen, ohne sich auszusetzen', *ibid.*). In the course of the novel, Lukas does indeed prove to be unable to see Aloe as a person in her own right, rather than as an object of his needs and his desires. The pornographic cards are just as symptomatic of this inability as the satellite images which Lukas examines after his first date with Aloe.

As Lukas stares at the images of blue or red stars gleaming up on his computer screen, he soon forgets Aloe again. The reader, meanwhile, is led to understand that the main function of celestial images in *Mitgift* is not in fact to reference outer space, but rather to indicate the personality of Lukas who looks at them. The meaning and importance of photographic images in Draesner's novels does not lie in their content – what the images show – but in the way(s) in which they are seen and experienced. Particularly in *Mitgift*,

photographic discourses do not centre on the photographic image itself, its technology or its reference, but on the relation between images and their spectators, on the ways in which spectators arrive at their interpretation of photographic images, and on the underlying statement these make about the subjectivity of the spectator. Thus, even the Hubble telescope images, which were not shot by a human photographer and do not correspond to a human gaze, and may therefore be rightfully called an example of posthuman photography, remain bound to a human horizon.

*Mitgift* offers us a phenomenological idea of the photographic image: a photograph is not so much about what it shows as about how that is seen and experienced by the viewer. That experience emerges out of a collusion between the subject, the photographic surface and the objects that it depicts. Thus, the photographic image opens up a space of potentiality in which subject and object may encounter each other. In this way, photographs make or unmake relations. Theorists of photography such as Ariella Azouley, Susie Linfield or Margaret Olin have recently argued that photography makes connections with people, that photographs build community, create affect and foster engagement with others, even altruism.<sup>25 26</sup> Draesner's novels seem to arrive at a more sceptical conclusion. When Aloe later takes pictures of Lukas, this does not provide her with knowledge of who he is; indeed, her picture-taking seems more a form of estrangement than a method for fostering affect and empathy.

## **Abstraction**

In the opening episode of chapter 2, Aloe is a moderately successful photo artist discussing photography with her new partner, Frank. Asked by Frank how long she has been taking pictures, Aloe replies not with a date but with her justification for photography as an art form:

Weil du lernst, etwas zweimal zu sehen. Und wenn du es zweimal sehen kannst, dann auch hundertmal. Auf einem guten Foto durchschaust du einen Körper als all die Körper, die er einmal gewesen ist und die er noch werden kann.

[Because you learn to see something twice. And if you can see it twice you can see it a hundred times. In a good photo you see through a body, recognizing in it all those bodies it has been and it can still become]. (*Mitgift*, p. 61)

Photography, for Aloe, is intimately connected with the body; at the same time, she finds in photography a tool for distancing the body from its human subjectivity. A body is all bodies, past and future, nothing individual. The artist who for Aloe most embodies this de-humanization and de-subjectivation is Spencer Tunick, who photographs large crowds of naked people. Aloe, who has written her doctoral dissertation on photography of the masses, admires the abstraction in these photos, which turn individual bodies into de-humanized ornaments. As Aloe remarks to Frank, their nakedness means that the bodies in Tunick's photographs are all alike, rendering them less individual. But this does not foster a sense of connection between the participants. Indeed, any communication within these photos seems directed at a spectator from the future, rather than taking place between the participants within the image. In this sense, Tunick's photos, even though they are full of people, point towards the posthuman, which according to Rosi Braidotti marks a shift in the construction of

subjectivity from a unified self, endowed with a determining will, to a multi-layered, multi-modal subjectivity constructed through mediated and digital relations to organic and inorganic (technological) others. Braidotti argues that the posthuman helps us make sense of our flexible and multiple identities, and although Tunick's photographs do not foster community, photography does become therapeutic for Aloe.

In the present of the framing episodes, Aloe draws on photography to ward off affect, but she also uses photographs as tools for embodied viewing and knowledge production. Her photographs of malformed beetles from the perimeter of nuclear power plants make visible the effects of radiation, but when she retouches and assembles only the images on the beetles' shields into ornaments, she creates an uneasy tension between documentation and abstraction. This photographic practice can be seen as a contribution to the concept of posthuman photography also envisaged in Reinhard Jirgl's *Die Stille* [*The Silence*, 2009], where the character Dorothea takes pictures of landscapes that have been ruined through strip mining and been made unsuitable for human habitation.<sup>27</sup> However, Aloe's photographs appear less pessimistic: her malformed insects are beautiful; in fact the ornaments become used as textile patterns. The novel that tells of her photography also ends hopefully when Aloe and Stefan go to the airport to pick up Lukas.

### **Aura**

The terms I have used to capture some of the image practices and photographic discourses in *Mitgift* and *Vorliebe* – surface, distance, and abstraction – have been bywords of photography criticism since the 1920s. For instance, Walter Benjamin's 'A Short History of Photography' (1931), which became highly influential in photography studies from the 1980s onwards,

disputed photographic realism by arguing that photographs only ever show us the surface appearance of things and places. The tension between surface and an underlying, possibly withheld, depth also concerns Benjamin in his remarks about the aura. According to the better-known definition in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility' (1936), the aura is bound to a presence in the here and now: 'there is no facsimile of the aura.'<sup>28</sup> Critics often take this to mean that 'the authenticity of the aura cannot be reproduced', and associate the aura with original artwork rather than the mechanical images of photography.<sup>29</sup> But when Benjamin first introduced the aura concept in his essay 'A Short History of Photography', he described early portrait photographs as intensely auratic, concluding that 'the most precise technology [could] give its products a magical value, such as a painted picture can never again have for us'.<sup>30</sup> Thus, as Douglas Crimp points out, 'the aura is not an ontological category as employed by Benjamin but rather a historical one. It is not something a handmade work has that a mechanically made work does not have'.<sup>31</sup> Even more than that, Diarmuid Costello argues that the aura, for Benjamin, does not pertain to objects of perception (works of art, photographs, or other things) at all, but to the structure of perception itself.<sup>32</sup>

Aura, in Costello's reading, describes a way of seeing the world to which photographic as well as non-photographic images invite us. A similar point could be made regarding Siegfried Kracauer's understanding of abstraction, which he develops in the 1927 essay 'The Mass Ornament'.<sup>33</sup> The ornament is an empty form of modern rationality, but its abstraction also grants the spectator an indirect way of perceiving otherwise hidden social and political structures. For both authors, the dehumanizing aspects of modern visual culture contain within them the dialectical possibility of a humane vision that counteracts the dehumanization of modernity, although the connection of such a counter-gaze with the

humanity of its agent is much stronger in Benjamin than in Kracauer. The logic of the photograph that Ulrike Draesner explores in *Mitgift* seems to arrive at a similarly dialectical conception of the photographic image. The critical attitude towards photography as distancing, dehumanizing and commodifying that is associated with the young Aloe's perspective has to be modified in light of the more mature experience of Aloe in the present. In a digital anthropocene, humans can still understand and fashion their world as *homines pictores*. Aloe's life is proof of this capacity. Neither a postmodern rejection of the image nor a technologically minded glorification of the post-human offer viable alternatives to the close connection between humans and their images.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe; Die Deutsche Bibel*, 12 vols (Weimar: H. Böhlau and successors, 1912–1961), vol. 10.1, p. 100. Compare Albrecht Beutel, *Protestantische Konkretionen: Studien zur Kirchengeschichte* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), p. 112.

<sup>2</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder, 'Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache', in *Werke in zehn Bänden*, vol. 1: *Frühe Schriften*, ed. by Ulrich Gaier (Frankfurt a. M.: Deutscher Klassiker-Verlag, 1985), pp. 695–810.

<sup>3</sup> Arnold Gehlen, *Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt*, 14<sup>th</sup> edn., (Wiebelsheim: Aula, 2004), p. 84.

<sup>4</sup> Gottfried Böhm (ed.), *Homo Pictor* (Munich, Leipzig: K. G. Saur, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images. Picture, Medium, Body* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Ulrike Draesner, *kugelblitz* (Munich: Luchterhand, 2005), pp. 26–27.

<sup>7</sup> Clemens Brentano, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe. Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, ed. by Jürgen Behrens, Wolfgang Frühwald and Detlev Lüders (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1975–), Frankfurter Brentano-Ausgabe, vol. 19, 96–97.

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Bernhard Waldenfels, *Sinne und Künste im Wechselspiel. Modi ästhetischer Erfahrung* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010).

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<sup>10</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Phantasy and Image Consciousness [1904/1905]. Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory (1898–1925)*, trans. by John B. Brough (Dordrecht: Springer 2005), pp. 1–206.

<sup>11</sup> Waldenfels, *Sinne und Künste*, p. 43 (my translation).

<sup>12</sup> Ulrike Draesner, *Mitgift* (Munich: Luchterhand, 2002); *Vorliebe* (Munich: Luchterhand, 2010). Translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

<sup>13</sup> Fred Ritchin, *After Photography* (New York: Norton, 2009), p. 18.

<sup>14</sup> Joel Snyder, 'Picturing Vision', in: *The Language of Images*, ed. by W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 219-246.

<sup>15</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5, p. 49.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art. Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Boris Groys, 'Art in the Age of Biopolitics. From Artwork to Art Documentation', in *Katalog* ed. by documenta11 (Ostfildern: Hatje Canz, 2002), pp. 108–14.

<sup>21</sup> Ritchin, *After Photography*, p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> See Friederike Eigler, *Gedächtnis und Geschichte in Generationenromanen seit der Wende* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2005); Laurel Cohen-Pfister and Susanne Veas-Gulani (eds.), *Generational Shifts in Contemporary German Culture* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> Lise Patt and Christel Dillbohner (eds.), *Searching for Sebald: Photography after W. G. Sebald* (Los Angeles: The Institute of Cultural Inquiry, 2007); Silke Horstkotte, *Nachbilder: Fotografie und Gedächtnis in der deutschen Gegenwartsliteratur* (Cologne, Weimar, Vienna: Böhlau, 2009).

<sup>24</sup> Silke Horstkotte and Nancy Pedri (eds.), *Photography in Fiction* special issue, *Poetics Today* 29:1, 2008.

<sup>25</sup> Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008); Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance. Photography and Political Violence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Margaret Olin, *Touching Photographs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

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<sup>27</sup> Reinhard Jirgl, *Die Stille* (Munich: Hanser, 2009).

<sup>28</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008), p. 31.

<sup>29</sup> Marita Sturken und Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking. An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 2nd edn. (Oxford, New York: Oxford UP, 2009), p. 196.

<sup>30</sup> Benjamin, *The Work of Art*, p. 276.

<sup>31</sup> Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), p. 112.

<sup>32</sup> Diarmuid Costello, 'Aura, Face, Photography: Re-Reading Benjamin Today' in, *Walter Benjamin and Art*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin (New York, London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 164–184.

<sup>33</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. and transl. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995).