

## The Power of Photographs of Buildings in the Dresden Urban Discourse. Towards a Visual Discourse Analysis

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**Abstract:** "Old Dresden" which is known worldwide as a symbol for inept destruction in World War II stopped existing in its physical form in February 1945. The image of "old Dresden," however, has been maintained in the minds of its citizens. This is as results of the visualization of historical buildings. Buildings are artifacts that can be experienced visually and aesthetically. Thus, it is not surprising that in the context of public discourses they "demand" an appropriate representation in a visual and in an aesthetic respect. In the urban discourse of Dresden the visualization of buildings plays an important role.

In the article the author exemplifies her methodical approach to visual discourse analysis. She acts on the assumption that three levels of analyzing images must be taken into consideration: 1. the composition of the image, with its content and design, 2. the context of production and publication, including the horizon of historic events, and 3. the mode of reception, with respect to communicative processes.

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## 1. Introduction: Theoretical Background and Research Questions

The article is based on a sociology of knowledge research project which, using the example of Dresden, asked in what ways has the urban culture of the city developed historically from public discourses and in what way has it been handed down, or rather, transformed by communicative processes in the course of the centuries (see CHRISTMANN, 2004). For this purpose the concept of sociology of knowledge discourse analysis—presented by Reiner KELLER (1997, 2001, 2005)—was consulted, basing on BERGER's and LUCKMANN's social constructivism on the one hand and on FOUCAULT's discourse analysis on the other (see BERGER & LUCKMANN, 1966; FOUCAULT, 1982). The project examined how Dresden was represented between 1607 and 2000 by local

communications and which interpretations of the city's reality are still relevant at the present time. Among the data material there are works of literature from Dresden, articles from the local press, videos of Dresden, photographs, audio recordings of public events and interview narratives. [1]

The analysis of the literature from Dresden revealed that since the first books were published buildings have been a conspicuous topic of its urban discourse. Throughout this time their aesthetics, their uniqueness, and the fact that they are worth seeing have been emphasized. In the course of the centuries other topics were added (e. g. the important arts collections, the lively cultural life and so on). In the discourse, the subject of buildings, however, was of outstanding significance right from the beginning. [2]

Buildings are characterized by the fact that they "communicate" themselves spatially, aesthetically, and, in any case, visually. Thus, in the context of discourse they, so to speak, "demand" to be represented in a way which is "appropriate to their species," in a way that they can be aesthetically and also visually experienced. In the data we find accordingly aestheticizing linguistic descriptions of buildings, but also visualizations in the form of paintings, photographs, complete books of pictures, and more recently also in the form of videos. In this article I will exclusively look at visualizations in the form of photographs, namely photographs—as has already become obvious—being produced by the field itself and having come to public attention through the print media. [3]

The concrete research question for the intended visual analysis was: which meanings are included in visual data, and in what way do they contribute to the development of specific interpretations of the city's reality? Since the project aimed at reconstructing discourse topics and the genesis of local knowledge structure, the visual data—together with verbal ones—were in the context of a sociology of knowledge discourse analysis. Accordingly there had to be a consideration of which visual method of data analysis might be suitable in this context. [4]

In the following, firstly, my understanding of "photography" will be exemplified, subsequently my methodical thoughts will be sketched, and last but not least, by the example of selected data, it will be shown how I proceeded. [5]

## **2. What is a Photography?**

The special nature of photography—in contrast to language—is its depicting of *visual* characteristics of objects. Phenomenologically speaking, photography is a visual system of representation, by way of which the visibility of an object not being present is produced. Thus, we may state a relation of similarity between the photography, that is the representing part on the one hand, and the depicted object, that is the represented part on the other hand. However, at the same time it must be said that photographs do not simply capture reality. It is a photographic reality: spatial dimensions are reduced to a surface; furthermore angles,

selections, and designs have effect. Photographs do not offer an objective view of an object but a certain way to see it, or an idea of it. As such, photographs are always influenced by culture. By representing cultural patterns, however, they stabilize the respective culture. In contrast to the appresentation system of language, where meanings are more or less clearly defined, the visual appresentation system of photography offers multi-layered meanings. Photographs are polysemic, thus recipients may see and understand them in different ways. Stuart HALL's and John FISKE's statement that "texts are made by their readers" may be particularly true for visual materials (HALL, 1980a; FISKE, 1987). However, this does not mean that attributing a meaning to a photography happens arbitrarily and completely subjectively. Rather, an intersubjectively divided understanding of a picture is possible if producers and recipients share common socio-cultural practices. Against the background of common socio-cultural practices, photographs do not create "visual copies" of objects (in German: "Abbilder") but "imagined pictures" (in German "Denkbilder"), to say it in Aby WARBURG's language (WARBURG, 1998). [6]

### **3. Image Analysis in the Context of Sociology of Knowledge Discourse Analysis**

In the following I am acting on the assumption that within a discourse analysis three levels of analyzing images must be taken into consideration: It is not enough to analyze the composition of photographs, their content and design. Rather, their context of production and publication, including their horizon of historic events, and the way of reception, respectively the communicative further processing must be considered. [7]

As is well-known, there exists no established method of discourse analysis particularly for images. Indeed, there are works which, while following FOUCAULT, examine photographs made in the context of state institutions and work out the role of these photographs for the discourse of power. In this context, John TAGG's (1980, 1981, 1988) research must be mentioned. It is difficult, however, to apply these studies to other research questions. Moreover, their methodology stays to be mostly implicit. [8]

Accordingly, other methodical approaches must be examined for their suitability. Doing this, it becomes obvious that many methods of image analysis are rather one-sided—as will be shown by Table 1.

Approaches of image analysis	with focus on		
	image composition: content and design	context of production and publication; horizon of historic events	ways of reception
<b>Cultural studies: encoding-decoding approach (HALL, FISKE)</b>	X	X	X
Semiotic image analysis (BARTHES)	X		
Objective hermeneutics (HEINZE-PRAUSE & HEINZE)	X		
Iconographic-iconologic image analysis (PANOFSKY)	X	(X)	(X)
<u>Further developed versions:</u>			
<b>Iconic interpretation (IMDAHL)</b>	X	(X)	(X)
<b>Serial-iconographic photography analysis (PILARCZYK &amp; MIETZNER)</b>	X	X	(X)
<b>Structural-hermeneutical symbol analysis (MÜLLER-DOOHM)</b>	X	(X)	
Social practice and the use of photography (BOURDIEU)			X
Ethnographic photographs as interview stimuli (COLLIER & COLLIER)			X

Table 1: Approaches of image analysis [9]

Of course, the *cultural studies* approach is common and is an exemplary method. Supporters of this approach assume that not only the media product as such but also its production and reception must be included into the analysis (HALL, 1973, 1980a, 1980b, 1997; FISKE, 1987, 1989a, 1989b, 1994). However, this is a postulate; there is no worked-out, methodical procedure for it. Moreover, in the context of visual media the representatives of cultural studies have predominantly dealt with television, less with images or photographs. Nevertheless the comprehensive research program of cultural studies was a guideline for my examination. [10]

In contrast, *semiotic image analysis* usually puts the single image into the fore. Analogously to texts, images are considered to be coded messages which may be decoded by the syntax, semantics, and pragmatics of figurative symbols (see BARTHES, 1967, 1977, 1981). Also the method of *objective hermeneutics*, which meanwhile has been applied to pictures of every nature, refers to the single image (see for example HEINZE-PRAUSE & HEINZE, 1996). Both, objective hermeneutics and semiotic image analysis, however, shall not be taken into further consideration here because photography and text are considered to be structurally equal, which is wrong in my opinion (see Section 2). [11]

My own analyses are—among others—based on the well developed method of Erwin PANOFSKY's (1932, 1939, 1957) *iconographic-iconologic image analysis*, particularly on Max IMDAHL's development of the analysis (see for example IMDAHL, 1994, 1996). IMDAHL's approach is more suitable for the analysis of visual phenomena of everyday culture (including photographs) than PANOFSKY's, which was developed first of all for works of art of the Renaissance period. Nevertheless, IMDAHL takes over PANOFSKY's concrete, methodical way of proceeding. PANOFSKY's method, rooted in Karl MANNHEIM's sociology of knowledge, aims at working out the contents and communicative intentions and, ultimately, the ideologies and cultural meanings which are found in images. This method happens in three steps. In the first step, the pre-iconographic description, all details of the image are systematically described. In the second step, the iconographic analysis, the meaning of the image is concluded by way of employing knowledge from outside the image; among this there is knowledge coming from other, comparable images, but also knowledge of the image's production, use, and reception. Although the focus is on analyzing the image as such, it is remarkable that both the narrow and the broader context of the image are taken into consideration for its interpretation. Finally in the third and last step, the iconologic interpretation, by interpreting synthetically both the structure of the image and the contextual knowledge the image's "real meaning" is worked out. [12]

PANOFSKY's and IMDAHL's approach has also been developed in other directions. In this context, the main point of reference of my way of proceeding is the *serial-iconographic photography analysis* developed by the German educationalists' PILARCZYK and MIETZNER (2005a, 2005b). This method takes the specific conditions of production, distribution, and usage of photographs into consideration. Furthermore, a fourth step, the iconographic interpretation, is added to PANOFSKY's method. In the context of iconographic interpretation the photographer's intention is supposed to be worked out, whereas by iconologic interpretation unintended meanings are supposed to be reconstructed by including historic, political, social, and cultural backgrounds. [13]

Finally I also employed elements of Stefan MÜLLER-DOOHM's (1997) method of *structural-hermeneutical symbol analysis* because, apart from describing topical and aesthetical elements, this method analyses textual aspects and systematically takes the image-text relation into consideration, by way of which a special kind of the immediate publication context of images comes into view. [14]

Besides this there are various approaches focusing on ways of receiving images, the real analysis of the image, however, retreating to the background. Pierre BOURDIEU (BOURDIEU et al., 1990), for example, was interested in working out the *social practice and the use of photography*—particularly on the basis of interviews—to be able to show different kinds of the habits of social classes. Also John and Malcolm COLLIER (see COLLIER & COLLIER, 1987; COLLIER, 1995) drew on interviews; they used their own *ethnographic photographs as interview stimuli* and asked people about which meanings they connected to the images. In contrast to BOURDIEU's or the COLLIERs' ways of proceeding I preferred a different method of examining modes of use and reception. In the context of an ethnographic approach I observed situations during various public events, in the course of which actors take up images by themselves, use them, refer to them, comment on them, and thus also contribute to the public discourse on the city. [15]

#### **4. Exemplary Analysis of Selected Data**

In the following the analysis is inspired by the above mentioned approaches and synthesizes them. My explanation will, however, not be according to the hermeneutic steps of serial-iconographic photography analysis but to the three analysis levels of Table 1, that is the levels of image composition, production or publication context, and ways of reception. [16]

#### 4.1 Image composition



Figure 1: The Frauenkirche and the Neumarkt square in the 1930s (see SCHAARSCHUCH, 1945, p.16. For permission to reprint the photo I want to thank the Stadtmuseum Dresden.) [17]

The content of the photo is a square, surrounded by houses, which in the background leads to a narrow street. In the foreground two figures, hewed in stone, are conspicuous. In the left half of the image there rises a high building with a cupola, which in the lower left half is covered by a front of houses. It is the Frauenkirche on the Neumarkt. In the square, along the front of houses, some passers-by can be seen. Apart from this there are no more people in the square.

The formal design of the image is simple. According to the possibilities offered by technology in those days, it is a black-and-white image in portrait format, somewhat blurred. It is a long shot. The image as such is not spectacular at all. It may sound trivial, but the remarkable thing about it is the fact that the photographer considered this subject worth the effort, considered it to be of significance. The result of my analyses and research is that Dresden's historic buildings and sights of the city have been subjects worth being photographed since there have been cameras, particularly in the 1930s, when the easy-to-use 33 mm format was established. And even *before* the invention of photography there were copperplate engravings, wood engravings, and paintings of urban sights of Dresden. The oldest engraving dates from the year 1587. Images such as these are regularly found in diverse works of literature on Dresden. They serve as illustrations, are supposed to provide the recipient with a visual impression of the buildings, maybe also give visual evidence to their beauty, which is often remarked on mostly through captions. After all, they are also supposed to serve for remembering. [18]

#### 4.2 Production and publication context

*Immediate context of publication:* Things become interesting when we have a look at the immediate publication context of our image, for there is a counterpart to it.



Figure 2: The Frauenkirche and the Neumarkt square before and after the destruction in World War II (see SCHAARSCHUCH, 1945, pp.16/17. For permission to reprint the photos I want to thank the Stadtmuseum Dresden.) [19]

In a book two images in large format are confronted by each other on two opposite pages. Whereas the left image—which we already know and which, by the way, is captioned "The Frauenkirche viewed from the court of the Jews"—shows a photography of the intact Neumarkt, in the right image, from an almost

identical angle and in the same design, we see the Neumarkt with the ruins of the former front of houses and the Frauenkirche. In the center, sloping down from left to right, there is a mountain of debris. The figures in the foreground have stayed undestroyed. No people are seen. The sky is cloudy. The intact Neumarkt including the Frauenkirche is confronted with the destroyed square. This contrast may be considered a rhetorical means—an antithesis. It is obvious that the publisher intended an emotional effect. Elsewhere in the context of categories of moral communications I was able to show that the element of contrasting is typical for lamenting (CHRISTMANN, 1999). This seems to be true also for visual data. [20]

*Further context of publication:* If we have a look at the further context of the publication, we will find that this rhetorical means goes throughout the entire volume and even increases the dramatic effect. For example, we see sights of the Zwinger, a particularly luxurious building among Dresden's Baroque buildings: among others, the so called Kronentor (see Figure 3) and the glockenspiel of one pavilion of the Zwinger (see Figure 4), made of porcelain, are shown. The silhouette of the city is another motif, besides numerous other buildings and sights of the city (see Figure 5). So to speak it is an enumeratio, a never ending list, a sad story. And its moral is: buildings which once were considered the highlights of Dresden's history of building have been severely damaged by the bomb war or are in ruins. The loss of valuable cultural goods must be lamented. Besides this there is an undertone of accusing those being responsible. It is remarkable that the volume does almost without words: short captions are enough, serving for naming the depicted buildings. A preface of little more than ten lines, written by the head of the Dresden News Authority, Kurt Liebermann, provides the work with a frame (see Figure 6). What is most revealing about the preface is its second sentence which confirms the analysis. The volume, it says there, "is not only supposed to make clear about the loss and damage, not only to increase our knowledge of the guilt of the Nazi war mongerers, but also to spur active contribution." Thus, this book is meant also as an appeal, as a call for reconstruction. By way of the verbal framing a political—not to say: a propagandist—dimension becomes obvious.



Figure 3: The Zwinger (a luxurious Baroque building) with its Kronentor (crown portal) (see SCHAARSCHUCH, 1945, pp.8/9. For permission to reprint the photos I want to thank the Stadtmuseum Dresden.)



Figure 4: The Zwinger with its glockenspiel, made of porcelain (see SCHAARSCHUCH, 1945, pp.12/13. For permission to reprint the photos I want to thank the Stadtmuseum Dresden.)



Figure 5: The silhouette of "old Dresden" (see SCHAARSCHUCH, 1945, pp.14/15. For permission to reprint the photos I want to thank the Stadtmuseum Dresden.)

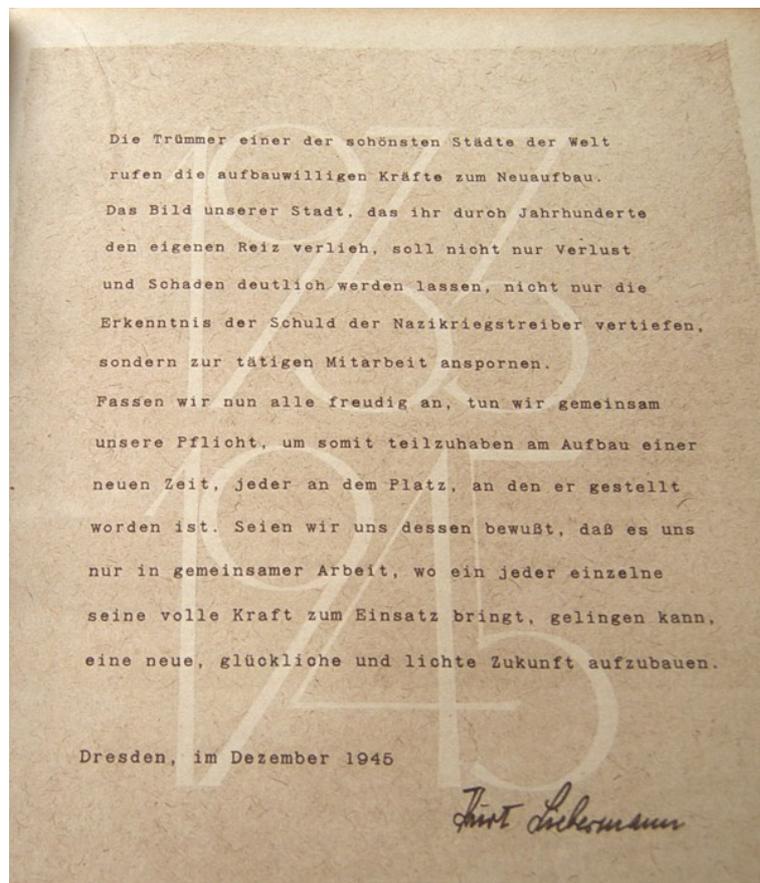


Figure 6: Preface of the book "Picture Document of Dresden. 1933-1945," written by the head of the Dresden News Authority (see SCHAARSCHUCH, 1945, p.5. For permission to reprint the photo I want to thank the Stadtmuseum Dresden.) [21]

*Horizon of historic events/context of production:* This makes clear that for analysis the horizon of historic events must be taken into consideration. This work, which is entitled "Bildokument Dresden. 1933-1945 (Picture Document of Dresden. 1933-1945, see Figure 7)," is the first publication to be published after

the destruction of Dresden (SCHAARSCHUCH, 1945). It was published by the Council of the City of Dresden as early as December, 1945, the year of the city's destruction, and thus is of an official nature. The photographer, Kurt SCHAARSCHUCH, fled to Western Germany in 1952 and died a few years later. There are few other works by him, his unpublished photographic works have hardly been used up until today (see also STADTMUSEUM DRESDEN, 1996).

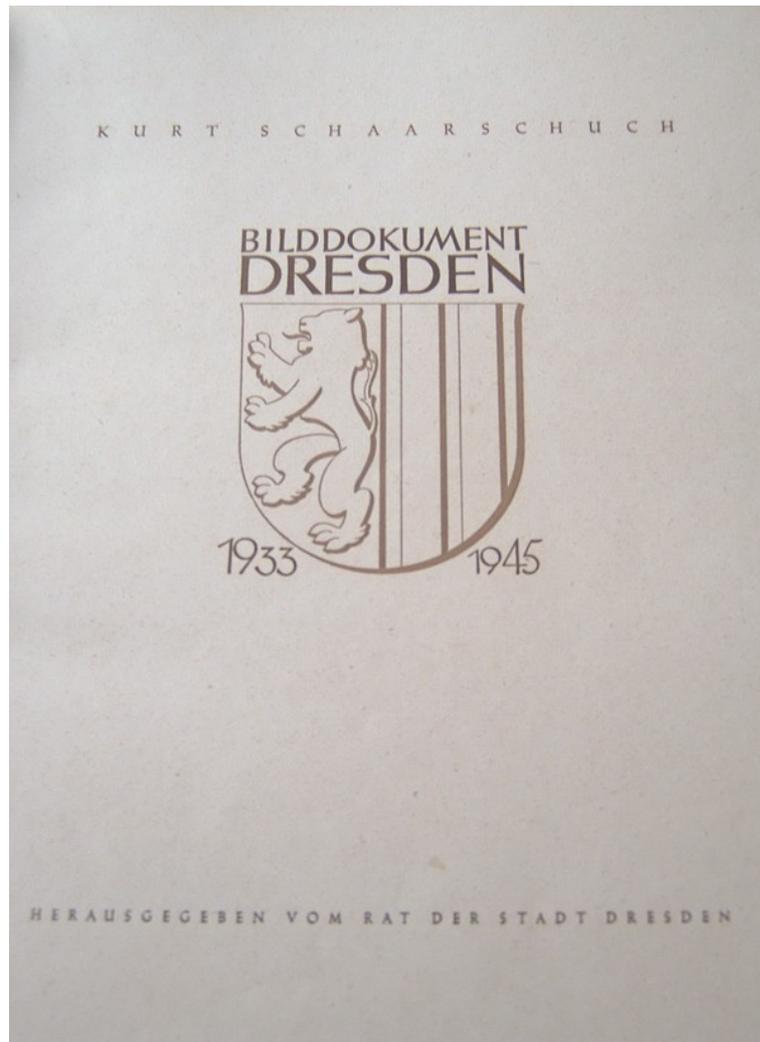


Figure 7: The title page of the book "Picture Document of Dresden. 1933-1945" (see SCHAARSCHUCH, 1945, p.3. For permission to reprint the photo I want to thank the Stadtmuseum Dresden.) [22]

*Extended context of publishing:* However, SCHAARSCHUCH's volume is not a single case, rather it is part of a differentiated literature on Dresden. Apart from books of pictures, contrasting photographs of the intact and the bombed out city, there are works showing nothing but ruins. Both the visual contrasts and the accounts of ruins are highly expressive. Without (many) words, they express loss and mourning. I call these works "visual lamentations." Soon they were joined by works showing reconstructed building memorials and ensembles. Some of them contrast contemporary photographs of reconstructed buildings to pre-war

photographs of building memorials—again from the same angle (see Figure 8). These are mirror images of splendid Dresden by the reconstructed city, the contemporary photographs impressing by their colorfulness (see Figure 9). There is the impression that old Dresden has resurrected and is more alive than ever. Nevertheless, it becomes obvious what is missing.



Figure 8: The Zwinger wall and the Zwinger courtyard in the 1930s and nowadays (see for example SCHIEFERDECKER & MÜNCH, 1999, pp.8 and 9. For permission to reprint the contemporary photos I want to thank the photographer, Christoph MÜNCH, and for the pre-war photos the Deutsche Fotothek/Sächsische Landes- und Universitätsbibliothek [Zwinger wall: archive number df\_m\_0005156; Zwinger courtyard: archive number df\_0053432].)

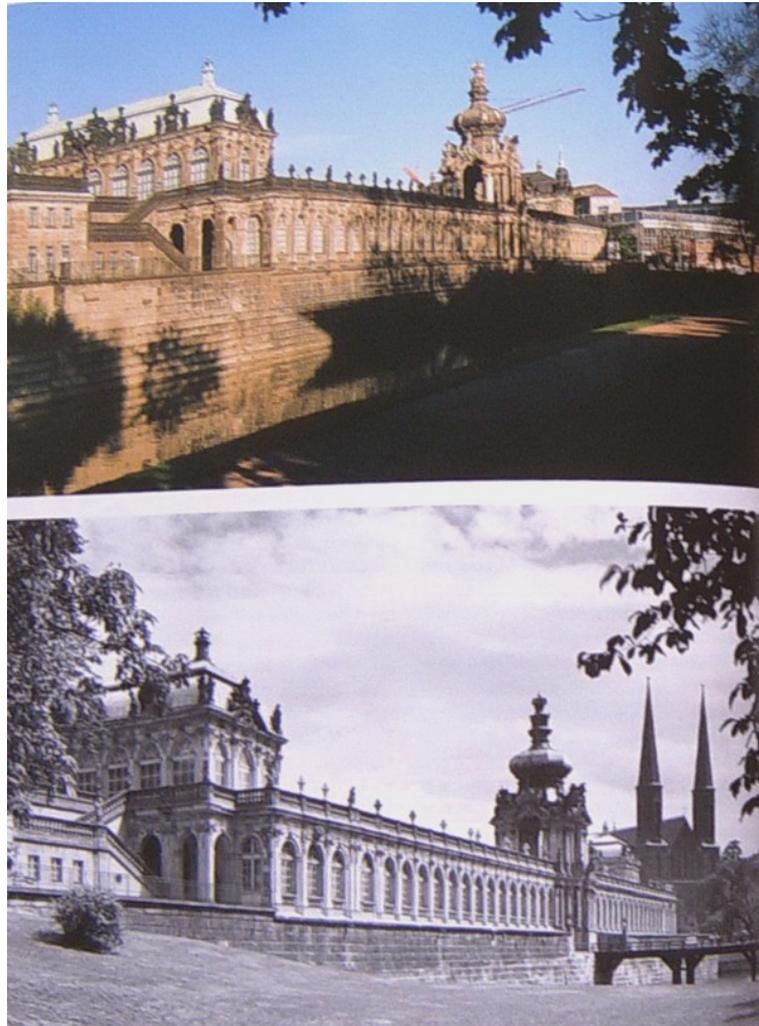


Figure 9: The Zwinger wall in the 1930s and nowadays (see SCHIEFERDECKER/MÜNCH, 1999, p.8. For permission to reprint the contemporary and pre-war photo I want to thank the photographer, Christoph MÜNCH, and the Deutsche Fotothek/Sächsische Landes- und Universitätsbibliothek [Zwinger wall: archive number df\_m\_0005156].) [23]

### 4.3 Ways of reception

The ways of reception and the further communicative processing of such photographs in the context of the public discourse on Dresden were analyzed ethnographically. My ethnographic observations in the context of public events, such as lectures, panel discussions, and guided tours produced the result that speakers regularly confront their audience with photographs (and partly also with films) of "old Dresden" and the destroyed city. Comments linguistically express the "meanings" one connects to the images. The following photo (see Figure 10) and the data segment come from a slide show, in the course of which the speaker finally shows the silhouette of "old Dresden" and comments as follows:



Figure 10: The silhouette of "old Dresden" in the 1930s (see SCHAARSCHUCH, 1945, p.14. For permission to reprint the photo I want to thank the Stadtmuseum Dresden.)

"This last image shall once again show us the old city, the wonderful silhouette of the city. When in 2005 the Frauenkirche will have been erected again, one might think that the firestorm never went over Dresden. Then Dresden will be beautiful again." [24]

By way of an aestheticizing semantics the city silhouette of "old Dresden" is positively valued. What is conspicuous is the fact that the completed view of the city, which at that time was planned for 2005, is anticipated and is equated with the "old city." The image of "old Dresden" serves as a background and a criterion: for only—as the speaker says it—when the "old silhouette" will have been reconstructed, "Dresden will be beautiful again." [25]

Also in the next segment a speaker refers to the "old city" by help of historic photographs:

"One must again and again look at these old images. And this way for us, who have not been able to have any live experience of the old city, there developed the image of this city: the particularly beautiful, balanced composition of squares and streets, the dense building structure ...". [26]

At first, the positive judgments are conspicuous. The squares and streets of the old city are said to have had aesthetic harmony. Most of all, however, we gain some insight into the "ethno-theory" on historic photographs of Dresden, which is common among the inhabitants of the city. It becomes obvious that the citizens attribute an "influencing" effect on their mental images of Old Dresden to these photographs. The examples show the ways in which public events, historic photographs of Dresden and the comments connected to them contribute to passing on the image of "old Dresden" and thus to keeping it alive. Different authors, most of all Aby WARBURG, have correctly pointed to the fact that

photographs play an essential role in remembering. They initiate communication with the past. In this way the collective memory is kept up. [27]

Apart from public events we find photographs of historic sights of the city also in local newspapers. For decades, this local medium has not only printed historic photographs of Dresden but also commented on them, and this way until today they have contributed to reception by the city's inhabitants. [28]

## **5. Conclusion: On the Effect of the Visual Representation of Historic Buildings**

The topos of Dresden being an architectural work of art, which is commonplace of Dresden's urban discourse, was able to root deeply into the collective memory. In this context the visualizations of old sights of the city may be supposed to have played a significant role. They made sure that the concrete design of buildings and sights of the city could be passed on as a visual experience that escaped destruction. These visualizations, however, ought not to be looked at in an isolated way. They are embedded into the verbal discourse on buildings, into various kinds of communication, where their meaning is negotiated. Together with regularly emphasizing the aesthetic nature and cultural significance of the buildings, historic photographs of Dresden influenced the construction of "mental images" of the city. By way of a distinctive verbal and visual discourse the historic sights of the city even became an effective model for urban development. Thus, we can explain why it was that after the Second World War GDR plans, which aimed at extendedly clearing away the ruins and reconstructing a new, socialist Dresden, were thwarted by the resistance of the inhabitants of the city. The power of party ideology could be broken by the power of the Dresden myth. Also in the most recent history, numerous historic architectural monuments have been rebuilt one after the other. The reconstruction of the Frauenkirche is a preliminary peak in the context of these attempts. [29]

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